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Capital characteristics of Thai elites in the Bangkok period (1782–2007)¹

Rungnapa Yanyongkasemsuk

Abstract

Pierre Bourdieu described the production and reproduction of intellectual, economic, political, and bureaucratic elites in France using empirical evidence to analyze the relationship of capitals and the elites' position in the social field. He concluded that cultural capital was the most important factor, but that wealth was also essential and could be transformed into other forms of capital. Based on Bourdieu's approach, this paper describes the characteristics of Thai elites before the revolution in 1932 and those in the new political era. Elites in Thai society include members of the royal family, aristocrats, overseas Chinese businessmen, and intellectuals. The inheritance of cultural capital allowed Thai elites to reproduce their class positions in society and pass them on to their descendants from generation to generation, and thus the characteristics of Thai elites have not changed.

Introduction: a catalog of Thai elites and their capitals

Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, described the characteristics of elites as follows:

No noble title suffices in and of itself to confer nobility in societies that claim to reject nobility. So, for example, the highest academic titles are necessary but insufficient, possible but not inevitable, conditions for access to the establishment. And wealth, when it is not accompanied by the appropriate 'manners,' is even less sufficient. ... entrance into 'society' assumes that one 'refine one's upbringing' and 'lose one's local accent.' The importance of the position occupied, ... or the size of the share holder equity, is significant. In democratic societies; it is in the nature of 'elites' to

be defined statically.... all members of the group do not possess all the properties that define the group as such and, ... the boundary of a group like the economic establishment is an imaginary line. (Bourdieu, 1998: 315–6)

Bourdieu also stated that “all aristocracies define themselves as being beyond all definition. The business gentry feels and claims that it is beyond formal criteria of recognition and explicit rules of behavior.... Consensus does not arise through rules, even unwritten ones... but from the opinion people have of an individual's behavior... ‘We instinctively recognize the ones who are and the ones who aren’t’, a top industrial leader states” (Bourdieu, 1998: 316). Thus, one of the best ways to define the characteristics of an elite is by describing the volume and type of capital that this elite possesses, because these are what define and distinguish elites from others.

Bourdieu defined capital as “accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its ‘incorporated,’ embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e. exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor” (Bourdieu, 1997: 46). There are four types of capital: economic, social, cultural, and symbolic. Economic capital is represented by properties, assets, and income. Social capital includes social connections and relationships with both elite and non-elite groups. Cultural capital is divided into three forms. The first is embodied in the individual; it is both inherited and acquired, including such matters as manners, language, and lifestyle. The second is objects which elites possess, for example, books, collections, paintings and so on. The third form is academic credentials. Bourdieu called these three forms as cultural capital in an embodied state, objectified state, and institutionalized state respectively. The last type of capital is symbolic capital which includes honor, prestige, or anything which is rare and difficult to acquire (Bourdieu, 1997: 46–75).

For Bourdieu, all types of capital function together to distinguish an elite. In Bourdieu’s empirical research (1989, 1998), French elites are identified via manners, cultural tastes, academic capital, social capital, and economic capital. In his book, State
Nobility, Bourdieu presented examples of individuals with high and low cultural capital. Roger Martin is an example of a top French state boss who possessed both cultural and economic capital, illustrated by his way of life in one day: his breakfast was served in bed by a maid in a black dress and apron; he lived in a sedate bourgeois apartment building; he possessed paintings by famous masters; and he listened to the news, France-musique, and English cassettes while shaving, to save time (Bourdieu, 1998: 356—9). In contrast to Martin, Jacques Borel lacks both money and manners. Though he is a restaurant owner, his occupation is less prestigious and his income lower. That is, he has low stocks of symbolic and economic capital in Bourdieu's sense (Bourdieu, 1998: 316).

Bourdieu made a classification of occupations, preferences for sports, music, books, lifestyles, food, and educational institutions which made elites distinctive as compared to other people. For occupations and educational institution, Bourdieu illustrated the relevance of father's occupation and student's level of education, student's institution of higher education, and student's occupation (see Table 4, 5, 15, and 29 in Bourdieu, 1998 and Figure 9 in Bourdieu, 1989). On businessmen's occupations, Bourdieu stated that "noble activities—banking, heavy industry, shipping, public service... —are opposed to the hotel and restaurant business and all commercial and distributional activities" (Bourdieu, 1998: 316).

Bourdieu stated that tastes and life styles—aesthetic disposition, types of books preferred, entertainment, sports activities, newspaper reading, concert attendance, theater attendance, and club membership—were related to education, social origin, class, fraction of the dominant class, and capitals possessed (see Table 2, 3, 19, 21, 33, and 35 in Bourdieu, 1989 and Table 22a, 22b, 35 in Bourdieu, 1998). Most cultural consumption depends upon economy, income, and education. For example, engineers show more interest in music and intellectual games such as bridge or chess than in literary activities such as theatre-going or reading (Bourdieu, 1989: 116). People are distinguished by the type and volume of capitals they possess. Each society places its own value on various capitals, particularly cultural and symbolic capitals. Some capital characteristics are dominant while others are not. Capital values are defined by society.
Research on elites in other societies have mostly confirmed Bourdieu's propositions. Most such research focused on academic capital as it was easy to collect such data, and as academic capital is more obvious than symbolic capital and other types of cultural capital. In Laos, Halpern (1961) indicated that most Lao elites are either direct descendants of old royal families or of courtiers. The children of the traditional elite had preferential access to limited educational facilities. The French government sent selected members of the Lao royal family and high nobility to study in France before World War Two, and later members of this small group occupied key government positions. Moreover, they were all strongly influenced by French culture, and possessed the ability to speak and write French fluently so this became one of the marks of membership in the elite class (Halpern, 1961: 26). Members of this elite also moved into profitable business alliances with Chinese and European merchants. This was to mutual advantage since government restricted aliens from owning and operating businesses, while most Lao lacked the technical expertise. The Lao elites had a monopoly on the highest positions in the civil service and politics. They could be appointed into both categories at the same time (p. 28). Halpern showed that receiving titles and concluding marriages with members of the hereditary elite were essential to an outstanding individual's mobility. Elites tended to perpetuate their group by restricting access to limited educational opportunities because education was key to government employment and the means to social mobility (p. 29).

Zonis (1968) asserted that there was a wide gap separating elites from the mass in Iran because Irani elites were raised by parents belonging to the landed gentry. They were well educated and spoke one or two foreign languages. They had numerous opportunities to acquire new knowledge directly (p.135). Education in Iran, especially at the higher levels, was restricted to the scions of the narrow, upper strata. The content of education tended to be less oriented towards modern Western culture (p.141). These were reasons that the older and younger elites were still the same group. In addition, they traveled and lived abroad, mostly in Europe and the United States, and pursued a multiplicity of occupations. These factors sharply contrasted with the life of the masses who were
illiterate and poor.

Besides education which is an important part of cultural capital, there are other factors observed which align with Bourdieu’s approach. Hanley, Yershova, and Anderson (1995) described elite circulation and elite reproduction in Russia during the period 1983–93. Their study indicated there was a strong continuity between the nomenklatura, the privileged elite that dominated the Soviet Union in 1988, and the elites who ruled Russia in 1993 (p. 641). More than half of the new elites were members of the nomenklatura who continued to occupy an elite position in the new political context. They had jumped from state and political party into the economy and state enterprises in order to retain their status. As for social origin, those two groups were practically identical. A class had reproduced itself. Cultural capital, especially education, played a major role for both the nomenklatura and post-communist elites. Both elites were well-educated (p. 655). Regime change did not alter the routes for entering the elite; most elites from the communist period remained elites in the post-communist period in both the political and economic sectors (p. 657). The authors stated that the formation of the elites in the two periods of communism and post-communism was like old wine in new bottles.

In his study of the Philadelphia elite, Priest (1995) asserted that many qualities of cultural capital in Bourdieu’s sense including occupations, geographical mobility, educational affiliations, club memberships, and religious affiliations remained constant over the period from 1940 to 1975 (pp. 167–72). However, some people lost their influence, particularly economic influence. Their loss may reflect the erosion of portions of the upper class economic base.

In a study on the social origins of the Chinese scientific elite who are the members of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS), Cong Cao (1999) asserted that birth place is crucial because the recruitment of scientists into elite status depended on their early social position and educational career which shaped their viewpoint. In China, economic conditions were highly related to regional location. Shanghai, Nanjing, and Hangzhou were examples of highly commercialized cities, while the Changjiang Delta and the Lower Yangzi region were among China’s richest agricultural areas.
People from such regions had more access to education because businessmen had contributed money for the establishment of schools and for funding education (p. 997). Higher levels of economic and educational development were the main factors determining that parents send their children to attend college. The father's occupation, parent's education, and family influence were also crucial. Among the fathers of CAS members, one fourth were teachers while only 8.8 percent were farmers. However the higher status of some fathers did not mean that they were affluent; meritocracy had provided opportunities to children from humble origin to gain higher status through government scholarships, foreign scholarships, loan programs, and other support measures. The educational attainment of father and mother were important. The father's education served as a role model while the mother's education helped to create a learning environment in the family. Both encouraged the children to study hard in order to get ahead in society. Students who wished to raise their status tried to enter Beijing, Nanjing, Qinghua, Fudan, Wuhan, Zhongshan, or Xiamen Universities and some missionary universities. Graduates from these prestigious universities had good opportunities to find prestigious jobs, earn doctoral degrees, and obtain training from abroad (pp.1005—10). So education was an important channel for achieving upward mobility.

On South Korea, Lee and Brinton (1996) stated that graduation from an elite university, especially an undergraduate degree, was a minimum requirement for entering top firms and gave an advantage in gaining higher status, class, and income (pp. 171–2). The prestige or elite universities were ranked by the scores achieved by their applicants in entrance examinations. There was a close relationship between family backgrounds, human capital, and prestigious universities. Social capital from institutional connections, friends, and university alumni played key roles in the high competition for acquiring the best jobs in large firms. Attendance at elite universities was significant for accruing human capital and social capital (pp. 188–9).

In the case of the Ivory Coast, Charlick (1978) showed that students were aware of the inequalities in gaining access to elite educational institution. The socio-economic origins of parents—
socio-occupational rank, knowledge of French, formal educational level of father, and parental financial support—were significantly related to their children’s access to elite education. However, the post-secondary level was open to students from less privileged origins. The relationship between socio-economic privilege and access to higher education was weak and the recruitment to elite programs which prepare graduates for prestigious and high-income positions was open to individuals from a variety of social backgrounds (p. 197). The finding of this study is quite different from the others.

Much of the literature, except for the case of the Ivory Coast, shows that class, taste, and inequality, which appear in every society, are produced and reproduced from the past to the present. These works illustrate Bourdieu’s theories regarding forms of capital and their reproduction.

There has been little research on the capital of the Thai elite. Most of the literature is specifically about economic capital. Suehiro Akira (1989) traced the history of business and capital accumulation. He then analyzed the dominant capital groups with what he called the “tripod structure theory” (p. 6). Before the 1932 revolution, there were European merchants, Chinese capitalists, and sakdina enterprise in which the king was the chief element. After the revolution, the dominant capitalist groups consisted of multinational corporations, Chinese families, and state enterprises. The last two groups had links with businessmen, military officers, and policemen in businesses and politics interests. He emphasized that “indigenous private capitalists have never played a significant role” (p. 275).

The study by Kevin Hewison (1989) is similar to that of Akira. He examined the Thai socio-economic structure in the modern period with a Marxist framework. He pointed out that Thai society was a capitalist society after the abolition of the absolute monarchy in 1932, particularly after the revolution in 1957 and the rise of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat to the premiership. There were four sectors of capital: agrarian, commercial, industrial, and banking of which the banking sector was the most powerful (pp. 3, 162). Each sector had strong personal links to the others to facilitate capital accumulation. Interlocking shareholding, directorships, and
marriage alliances create an intricate web of business and family connections (see Figure 12, 13 in Hewison, 1989: 184–5).

Chakrit Noranitipadungkarn (1981) examined the characteristics of Thai elites in two local communities. His study showed that the elites were very limited since they must possess wealth and/or position. Elite status and power were essential to facilitate the role of elite in politics and social status in the communities (p. 181). In Thai communities, the elites were normally community leaders, counselors in government and peoples' affairs, facilitators, implementers of community programs, arbitrators, guests of honor at rituals, and educators. Power, authority, and charisma are key characteristics for elite status rather than skills or education. Thus, studies on the capitals of Thai elites tend to confine themselves to economic capital (p. 180–1).

This paper aims to understand the characteristics of Thai elite capitals in Bourdieu's sense: the economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capitals which dominate Thai society. Types of elites are defined by social, economic, cultural, and political conditions.

Types of capital of Thai elites before the 1932 revolution

Before the revolution against the absolute monarchy in 1932, the sakdina system—a traditional system of numerical ranking—was the major factor defining the position, duties, power, and rights of each person in Thai society (Akin, 1980). Sakdina ranked people into four groups from highest to lowest: the royal family, aristocrats, commoners (phrai), and slaves. However, the elite can be defined as four groups: members of the royal family, aristocrats, overseas Chinese traders, and intellectuals.

Members of the royal family

The members of the royal family occupied the first rank of the sakdina system. They were the only group which had inherited titles such as His Majesty (somdet phra chao yu hua), and Her Majesty (somdet phra nang chao). These inherited titles were symbolic capital unavailable to other groups. Moreover, royal relatives were also conferred titles by the king such as chaophraya and somdet chaophraya.
In addition, royal family members inherited cultural capital that other elite groups wished to imitate. They were brought up to nurture and uphold their noble origins, duties to the kingdom, and distinctive status which made them different from other people in the sakdina system. Princes were raised and trained to occupy high positions. Royalty had their own royal language, way of life, dress, taste, practices, customs, and attitudes that distinguished them from other classes. Language was one of the most outstanding signs. People needing to communicate with royalty had to use rachasap (royal language) which enshrined forms of reverence, including special forms of address for the king and royal relatives (for example, song as pronoun; phra, phraratcha, phra borommaratcha as prefixes). In addition, kings and other royalty were accorded long names using grandiloquent words and poetic rhymes which indicated their distinctiveness. Such long names were also used to name royal objects such as the ivory box collection of King Rama V’s queen (Sompop, 1987: 109–11). After surnames were introduced in 1913, members of the royal family were accorded distinctive surnames ending with na Ayutthaya.

The king and the royal family possessed cultural capital in the form of objects such as palaces, royal temples, books, costumes, and rare collections. They received royal orders and decorations both from Thailand and abroad. Their names were applied to locations; for example, Prince Chakrabongse’s name was memorialized in Chakrabongse camp, Chakrabongse Road in Siriraj hospital and at Bangkok, and the Chakrabongse Building in the Red Cross Society compound. Other elites, including aristocrats and overseas Chinese, could not emulate such attributes.

The royal family also valued educational capital. In the reign of King Mongkut (Rama IV, r. 1851–68), members of the royal family were the first group who received western education from missionaries and European tutors. King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, r. 1868–1910) sent most of his sons to study abroad. Most graduated from prestigious institutions such as Oxford, Cambridge, and other European educational institutions in Switzerland, Denmark and Russia. Prior to their overseas education, princes attended schools established inside the royal palace specially for members of the royal family, including Rajakumara School and Raja College School. In
addition, they had to enter the monkhood where they had the chance to study the teachings of the Lord Buddha, Pali and Sanskrit languages, and the Buddhist value of righteousness.

After the educational reform in the reign of King Chulalongkorn, higher education became more widely available. Yet members of the royal family were still prominent among these attending universities, both at home and abroad, and they handed down the great value of education to their children in order to maintain their cultural capital, social position, and dominant class status.

Under the *sakdina* system, all land was in theory possessed by the king, but in practice, power, influence, and land possession were decentralized to members of the royal family and aristocracy by royal bestowal. The Bunnag family is an example of an aristocratic family that acquired high economic and cultural capital in the Bangkok period. Members of the Bunnag family held important positions from the reign of King Buddha Yodfa Chulalok (Rama I, r. 1782–1809) up to the reign of King Chulalongkorn. Members of the royal family had substantial economic capital because they possessed more land and labor than other groups.

After the signing of the Bowring Treaty in 1855, the emergence of a capitalist economy increased demand for land, labor, and agricultural products, especially rice. Members of the royal family with large holdings of land and labor became more influential and affluent than in the past. They accumulated assets by investing money from the royal treasury and entering business partnerships with aristocrats and overseas Chinese traders.

The king had many concubines and many offspring (Akin, 1980). Endogamy was practiced from the reign of King Buddha Yodfa Chulalok up to the reign of King Chulalongkorn in order to ensure capital was retained within the family. For example, King Chulalongkorn selected four half-sisters as his queens, and Prince Boworadej married his own half-sister. However, exogamy was also used to establish relations with powerful aristocrats; for example, King Buddha Yodfa Chulalok married the daughter of his prime minister (*phraya akkara mahasena*) from the Bunnag family, and two nieces of a rich Chinese trader (*chao sua hoi*; Piyanart and
Cultural capital in an embodied state or \textit{habitus} was possessed by the royal family through socialization and upbringing, use of royal language, training in court manners, royal costume, royal cuisine, and so on. Such cultural capital could rarely be imitated. It differed from other capitals which could be acquired by transforming economic capital such as academic credentials, objects, dress, collections of rare objects, and lands because it took time to internalize such \textit{habitus}.

\textbf{Aristocrats}

Aristocrats were those who were exempted from corvée labor and who worked for government and the crown service (Akin, 1980: 103). They were given titles expressing their rank and position in government or crown service such as \textit{khun}, \textit{luang}, \textit{phra}, \textit{phraya}, and \textit{chaophraya}. Members of the well-known Bunnag family held important positions in politics, economy, and society including the posts of prime minister (\textit{akkara mahasena}), minister (\textit{senabodi}), and other prestigious positions.

Land, labor, and wealth were derived from title and position in the \textit{sakdina} system in the same manner as for the royal family. After the Bowring Treaty, rice became a major export product and aristocrats invested in cooperation with overseas Chinese and some members of the royal family. The major businesses were leasing paddy land and building rice mills. The overseas Chinese initially had no rights to possess land, but later were able to acquire land and invest in mills, tramways, mines, banks, and canals. In the 1892 bureaucratic reform, King Chulalongkorn centralized all power under the king and royal relatives as an absolute monarchy. The wealth and power of aristocrats, particularly the Bunnag family, were reduced. However, educational reforms gave them a new route to enter the bureaucratic system.

Working in government service required knowledge and expertise. In the earlier period, aristocrats were educated in temples, learnt government practices and protocols from their family, and often inherited positions in the royal government service. Position and title were monopolized by a small group of powerful families. With the coming of the Western missionaries in the period of King


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Nangklao (Rama III, r. 1824–51) and King Mongkut, some wealthy aristocrats who realized the importance of education hired European or Thai tutors to teach their children.

After the educational reforms in the late nineteenth century, aristocrats sent their children to study in elite schools such as Suan Kularb School, Debsirin School, Assumption College, and Bangkok Christian College, or educational institutions in Europe, often on government scholarships. In the reigns of King Rama VI and VII, most scholarship students came from minor aristocratic families or middle-class commoner families. After graduation, scholarship students worked in the bureaucratic system and acquired the status attached to government position even though they might not be well-off. In this sense, education and bureaucratic service were a means for aristocrats to retain their status, as well as a route for the children of some non-aristocrats to elevate their status (Nanda, 1979).

Because of the dominant nature of the embodied capital possessed by the royal family, aristocrats tried to emulate the royal way of life, or even become associated with the royal family by marriage. Aristocrat families often offered their womenfolk to become concubines of the king.

Aristocrats often transformed economic capital into objects that indicated status. They constructed temples on their own land, or renovated temples, thereby converting them into family temples. For example, Wat Prayunrawongsawat Worawihan was built by a Bunnag ancestor, and Wat Phitchaya Yatikaram Worawihan was renovated by members of the Bunnag family (Netnapit and Piyanart, 1982: 10, 26, 30).

Aristocrats deployed their wealth and status to send their children to elite educational institutions, to directly and indirectly learn the royal way of life, to form economic and social relationships with other elite groups, to accumulate wealth through businesses, and to possess objects which were symbolic capital and cultural capital in an objectified state.

Overseas Chinese

While Thai commoners (phrai) were in the sakdina system and were forced to perform corvée for the government or their masters
(munnai), the overseas Chinese were not included in the sakdina system and thus had opportunities to acquire wealth. They also sought to contract private relationships with members of the royal family or powerful aristocrats in order to gain favor for their businesses. The overseas Chinese had opportunities to accumulate capital by trading and cooperating in business with other elite groups, and thus achieve higher success than Thai commoners.

After migration to Thailand, overseas Chinese learnt to adapt themselves to Thai socio-economic conditions, while exploiting their advantages of patience, industriousness, and commercial sense. Cultural capital in an embodied state or habitus gave them many advantages for creating substantial economic capital.

By becoming tax-farmers of the state, they could acquire the symbolic status of titles and positions in the upper reaches of the sakdina system. In return for their economic services, kings gave them power and privileges which were not usually given to commoners.

Overseas Chinese were engaged in many other businesses such as rice trade, rice and saw mills, shipping, banking and finance, insurance, cement industry, and bus transport. The Chinese junk trade played an important role, especially in the reign of King Nangklao. Subsequently, the overseas Chinese became a vital part of the Thai economy. Patron-client relationships with aristocrats or members of the royal family became a means to increase the economic capital of both patron and client. At a time of high demand for rice after the Bowring Treaty, overseas Chinese prospered by cooperating with royal relatives and aristocrats in the rice trade and rice milling (Panni, 2002: 113–4).

Successful overseas Chinese also helped their compatriots, enabling some to become community leaders accepted by the government, with official titles such as chao krom tha sai and phraya choduek ratchasetthi (Suprarat, 1993). They married endogamously in order to strengthen the social capital of family networks, such as that linking the Lamsam and Wanglee families. They also practiced exogamy with members of royal and aristocratic families, such as by presenting a concubine (chao jom) to the king. If such a concubine gave birth to a prince, she acquired the status of a royal mother, chao jom manda (Suprarat, 1993: 75–81).
Overseas Chinese also presented themselves or their sons to be royal pages (*mahatlek*) or courtiers (*nang kha luang*), putting themselves in a position to learn and emulate royal ways of life and royal traditions as well as acquire the symbolic capital of title and position (Suparat, 1993: 76–7). The second and the third generations of overseas Chinese families inherited such *habitus*, and also had the opportunity to acquire western knowledge, fashion, culture, and possessions such as dress and domestic accessories.

In the earlier reigns of King Nangklao and King Mongkut, the first and the second generations of Chinese families paid little attention to education as they concentrated on earning a living. Their main sources of learning were books, experience, and knowledge passed on by those in mainland China. Later, families which established social connections were able to emulate the education of the aristocracy. They sent their children to missionary schools in Bangkok such as Bangkok Christian College and Assumption College, or to schools in China, Hong Kong, and Singapore.

Overseas Chinese businessmen emulated aristocrats by spending on charitable works such as constructing and renovating temples, bridges, almshouses, and vegetarian halls on which the names of the donors were inscribed. This naming displayed economic, symbolic, and cultural capital in an objectified state (Saichon, 2003: 298).

Overseas Chinese were able to transform some of their economic capital into cultural capital in an embodied state and advantageous status in the *sakdina* system.

*Intellectuals*

After the arrival of Western missionaries during the reigns of King Nangklao and King Mongkut, some people embraced Western knowledge and technology. Before he became king, Prince Mongkut and some other royal relatives and powerful aristocrats were interested in languages, especially English, as well as in technology. They supported their children to acquire that knowledge because they were convinced that Western knowledge and technology would become an elite capital. But beside royalty and aristocrats, there was another group of intellectuals that emerged among lower-level bureaucratic families and commoners.
who hired tutors and sent their children to study in temples and schools.

These intellectuals, such as K.S.R. Kulap and Thianwan, acquired education, knowledge, capacity in language, and distinctive characteristics that guided society towards enormous changes (Charnvit, 2000: 114–33). They paid attention to politics, economics, and social affairs. They were little interested in title and position. Their habitus and symbolic capital was based on their acceptance as scholars or intellectuals through public knowledge of their opinions.

The role of the intellectuals who were outside the government and the bureaucracy became prominent after slavery was abolished, corvée abolished, and social and economic opportunities increased in the reign of King Chulalongkorn. The intellectuals in this period were composed of journalists, writers, authors, and lawyers. They came from relatively good socio-economic backgrounds, including farming families that recognized the importance of education and had the capacity to send their children to study. For poorer families, ordaining as a monk remained the best way to acquire education. In some temples, intellectuals learnt the Buddha’s teaching in English or Pali language and also had an opportunity to learn and to discuss with the philosophers of that age.

Intellectuals did not link to other elite groups by marriage and cooperation in business because their stock of capital, dominated by cultural capital, differed from the pattern of other elites. Their social capital was derived from knowledge, character, and marriage. Often they married educated women, such as teachers, from similarly undistinguished families. These marriages were not a means to accumulate social capital. They reproduced their knowledge as books and articles in journals and newspapers, cultural capital in objectified form. To maintain a relationship with their public, they had to communicate continuously.

Their economic status was inferior to other elite groups since they had no ideas about business. They also had no title, position, and social status in the sakdina system. Their habitus and knowledge were their sources of earning money. This was very different from other elite groups.

For the intellectuals, cultural capital in an embodied state,


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*habitus*, and institutionalized state were transformed into cultural capital in objectified form as social and economic capital.

**Summary**

In the period before the 1932 revolution, the members of the royal family possessed more capital than others, both in type and volume, and were thus at the highest position of the society. Aristocrats and overseas Chinese had similar means to acquire capital, but were inferior to members of the royal family especially in symbolic capital. These first three groups developed interrelationships in economic and social matters, especially business concerns and marriage networks. By these means, they could transform economic capital into other forms of capital, both directly and indirectly. Intellectuals were the exception. They had less economic capital than other groups and acquired capitals principally from knowledge and accredited qualifications.

**Types of capital of Thai elites after the 1932 revolution**

The great reforms of King Chulalongkorn affected Thai political, economic, and social structures during his reign and in the following periods. Slavery was abolished and commoners, including the peasantry, were released from forced labor. These measures tended to decrease the traditional economic capital of the king and royal family members but they did not suffer any net loss of capital. The liberation was carried out simultaneously with a centralization of public administration, which strengthened royal authority while weakening the powerful Bunnag aristocrat family (Chai-Anan, 1998: 48–9). The liberation and centralization allowed the royal family to transform and maintain their capital, especially cultural and symbolic capital.

Besides, bureaucratic reform proceeded in parallel with educational reform and administrative centralization. While educational reform extended educational opportunities to some commoners, the elite bureaucracy was still staffed by royal family members, aristocrats, and intellectuals who had been educated abroad. The number of educated members of these elite groups who adopted Western ideas and international outlook grew fast.
They mostly entered the bureaucratic system since traditional values had not changed—posts in the bureaucracy were still perceived as the most prestigious occupation. The Chulalongkorn reforms did not move towards greater equality but to consolidation of the existing elite.

The spread of Western knowledge and appreciation of political changes in countries such as England and France resulted in some educated people feeling a need to change the political regime and social structure. Finally, the absolute monarchy and sakdina system were overthrown in the 1932 revolution led by the People's Party. Nevertheless the essence of elite groups was not altered. In this period, the royal family members, bureaucrats, businessmen, intellectuals, and politicians constituted the elites.

**Members of the royal family**

The revolution had a severe impact on the king and the members of the royal family. Their power, prestige, and privileges were challenged by the People's Party (*khana ratsadon*) and especially by Plaek Phibunsongkhram (Phibun). Having graduated in France, Phibun rose to be prime minister in 1938. He pursued nationalist and anti-Chinese policies, and built a leadership cult. He ordered people to salute the flag, use simplified Thai language, and sing a new national anthem. He changed the country's name from Siam to Thailand, and promoted economic nationalism to compete with overseas Chinese traders (Charnvit, 1997: 356–408). He was antagonistic towards the monarchy.

But in 1957, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat became prime minister and revived royal tradition and rituals. Royal titles and distinctive names for members of the royal family were again widely recognized as symbols of the highest class. Sarit promoted royal activities which enhanced the charisma and authority of the king (Thak, 1979: 355).

During the reign of King Bhumibol (Rama IX, 1946–), members of the royal family were appointed as chief administrators of royal projects including the Doi Kham scheme to support hill tribe agriculture, and royal development projects under the Chaipattana Foundation registered by the king. People of royal ancestry who worked in such schemes were accorded high status,
symbolized by the grant of royal decorations, especially the highest order of Chulachomklao.

Another new practice was marriage bestowed by the king. Members of the royal family and other distinguished persons would ask for the king to bestow a marriage on their children as a very distinctive marker of status (Thak, 1979: 367).

Within the royal family, endogamy remained a popular way to preserve capital within a close lineage. An example was the marriage of the cousins, Princess Vibhavadi Rajani and Prince Piyarangsit Rangsit. At the same time, other royalty married exogamously to build capital connections, especially with the progeny of wealthy business families. An example is M.R. Sam-angvan Devakul, King Mongkut’s great-granddaughter, who married Bancha Lamsam of the wealthy overseas Chinese Lamsam family. Other members of the royal family married with bureaucrat families, such as the marriage of M.R. Sodsri Chakrapan, another of King Mongkut’s great-granddaughters, with former prime minister Anand Panyarachun, the son of a former minister of education.

Members of the royal family also entered into business enterprises jointly with business families (Sangsit, 1983: 76–7). By this means, the royal partner gained economic capital by tapping the other partner’s business skills, while the business partner gained social capital from the association with royalty.

One visible form of the royal family’s cultural capital was property, especially beautiful mansions. While some family branches declined after the abolition of the sakdina system, others such as the Paribatra, Purachatra, Kridakara, and Chakrabongse families remained in possession of land in the capital and at seaside resorts (Dlife, 2008: 4), as well as palaces such as Suan Pakkad (Paribatra family), Bangkhumprom (Sonakul family), and Voradit (Disakul family) (Thassana, 2006). Such property represented not only economic capital but also cultural capital in an objectified state and symbolic capital. These buildings display the family’s historical roots, aesthetic sense, and cultural elegance.

Members of the royal family, who had acquired the best available education in the earlier era, continued to send their children to the best schools in Thailand and abroad. Many graduated from such schools as Harrow, Rugby, and Eton and
universities such as Cambridge, Oxford, and Harvard.

Members of the royal family maintained their capitals in many different forms.

**Bureaucrats**

The modern bureaucracy was created by the Chulalongkorn reforms. Its members were aware of political changes in Western countries, for example England and France. Some of them spearheaded the revolution of 1932. The People’s Party was composed of educated aristocrats and senior bureaucrats. After the revolution, they abolished the titles and privileges of the old elites. But the bureaucrats inherited the patron-client values, attitudes, opinions, prestige, and self-image of the old aristocracy. They saw themselves as members of an elite rather than as servants of the people. Rising to high rank in the bureaucracy still depended on possessing the proper manners and etiquette.

Aristocrats who realized the importance of education sent their children to study at famous educational institutions in Thailand and abroad from secondary up to higher education. Middle class families also realized the importance of education, and supported their children to study as high as possible. Some received scholarships from the king or government to study abroad. Such scholarships conveyed not only academic credentials but also high status and language capability, all assets for climbing towards high bureaucratic office or political positions.

In 1955, Phibun founded the National Defense College (NDC) to educate civil servants and military officers in administrative skills. Students included senior military, police, and civilian officials from various governmental agencies and a smaller number of prominent executives from private and political sectors. However, most of them were bureaucrats. The NDC courses taught advanced strategic planning and implementation. After graduation, most students rose to the upper levels of the bureaucratic system, and some such as Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn and General Minister Surayuth Chulanont became prime ministers. The NDC equipped its graduates with academic credentials and social networks spanning the senior bureaucracy, national politics, and the business world.
Bureaucrats, especially those from aristocrat families, used marriage as a strategy to create close relationships and to retain their high class status. Endogamy strengthens social and cultural capitals while exogamy increases capital. Leading bureaucrat families tended to select spouses with good backgrounds. An example is Tej Bunnag, grandson of a former foreign minister, who was educated at both Oxford and Cambridge universities, and who rose to become permanent secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and foreign minister. His wife is the descendant of an aristocrat lineage with roots in the Ayudhaya period and also an official in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

In the post-1932 era, several military leaders such as Phibun, Sarit, and Thanom became prime minister by coup. In the parliaments of this era, many bureaucrats became senators, MPs, and ministers. Bureaucrats were also invited onto the boards of private companies and state enterprises (Akira, 1989). Especially during the Phibun era (roughly 1938–57), governments promoted state enterprises in various fields to compete against Chinese-owned enterprises (Akira, 1989: 138). Military leaders also took over firms that had earlier been controlled by members of the People’s Party (Akira, 1989: 141–2). In the Sarit-Thanom era (1957–73, military leaders set up their own businesses and state-sponsored companies, often working in joint venture with Chinese business families. For example, the whisky producer, Mahaguna Distillery, which was granted a monopoly concession by the Sarit and Thanom governments, was financed by such Chinese business families as the Techaphaibun and Lamsam. Military leaders were invited by Chinese business leaders to become general managers, executive directors, and major shareholders (Akira: 1989, 168–70). By these methods, military and civilian bureaucrats enhanced their economic capital. Whereas aristocrats under sakdina had accrued economic capital in the form of land and labor, bureaucrats in the post-1932 era used political power to gain access to assets and income.

Bureaucrats acquired symbolic capital in the form of royal decorations conferred by the king, including the Knight Grand Cross of the Most Exalted Order of the White Elephant, the Knight Grand Cross of the Most Noble Order of the Crown of Thailand, and several other graded types of decoration. Some bureaucrats,
who on retirement were recruited to serve on the king’s Privy Council or in other services for the king, were awarded the highest levels of decoration such as the Knight Grand Cordon of the Most Illustrious Order of Chulachomklao. Their wives might also be given decorations and such titles as Thanphuying and Khunying.

Businessmen

In the first Phibun government (1938–44), several restrictions and controls were placed on Chinese-owned businesses, and some were taken over by the state (Akira, 1989: 108–9). After his coup in 1957, Sarit changed course towards modernization and development. With technical and financial help from the US, Sarit’s government launched development planning, and ceased any discrimination against Chinese-owned business.

Chinese family businesses now expanded rapidly, particularly commercial banks and financial institutions owned by families such as Lamsam, Wanglee, Taechaphaibun, Rattanarak, and Sophonpanich. Often they were aided by links to the military rulers. For example, the Rattanarak family invited two military leaders, Praphat Charusathian and Prasert Ruchirawong, onto the board of their Bank of Ayudhya, while the Lamsam family’s Thai Farmers Bank gave directorships to Thaom while he was prime minister, defense minister, and commander-in-chief (Akira, 1989: 263). These relations represented an alliance of economic capital and political capital for mutual benefit.

Over time, some family enterprises became so well established that they became an objectified form of cultural capital. The surname of the family and the title of their core company became symbolic capital. Prime examples are the Chiaravanont and Sophonpanich family names, and their respective core companies of Charoen Pokphand (CP) and Bangkok Bank.

Chinese businessmen learnt from their ancestors that political power is essential for business success. The best way to access political power for business benefit is through direct participation. As democratic politics developed, businessmen became involved by financing or establishing political parties, and by submitting themselves as candidates for parliament and political office. Thaksin Shinawatra is an example of a successful businessman who entered
parliament, served as a minister, formed a political party, and became prime minister.

Businessmen deployed marriage ties to build networks which linked their own economic capital to the political capital of political leaders, and to the symbolic and cultural capital of the royal family and established bureaucrats. For example, a scion of the Learnamornlerd family, owners of the Suan Siam amusement park, married a member of the Disakul family, descendants of King Mongkut with a strong position in the bureaucracy. Business families also developed marriage links among themselves to solidify economic and social capital. For instance, a descendant of the Thangkaravakun family, owners of the TOA paint business and a shopping complex, married with the Wanglee family, prominent in finance and agricultural trading.

Successful businessmen had opportunities to attend a special program at the National Defense College (NDC) where they could forge links with senior bureaucrats, senior military, police officers, and politicians. Such links were sustained beyond graduation by alumni activities such as class parties, wedding celebrations, and religious rituals. Studying at NDC conveyed educational, symbolic, and social capital.

Leading overseas Chinese families invested heavily in education. Members of the second and third generations typically graduated from well-known universities in Europe or the US, mostly with masters’ degrees (Thanawat, 2000).

The wealth of Chinese businessmen provided them with the ability to convert economic capital into social, cultural, and symbolic capitals. The process of accumulating such capital and gaining acceptance by earlier established elite groups often extended over several generations but eventually equipped them with their own cultural capital in embodied and institutionalized states.

Intellectuals

Intellectuals emerged from many different backgrounds including royal families, the clergy, and common people, each with its own social background, status, and capitals.

Royal intellectuals were educated from the best educational institutions and gained fame as litterateurs. For example, M.C.
Akatdamkoeng Rabhiphadana, a grandson of King Chulalongkorn's grandson, wrote novels and short stories including *The Circus of Life* (1929) about polygamy and aristocratic lifestyle between old and new cultures. He studied law at the Middle Temple, London, and Georgetown University in the United States. M.R. Kukrit Pramoj, a politician, practitioner of traditional court arts, and a prominent exponent of the modern novel, was educated at English boarding schools and Oxford University (Sara, 1978).

King Bhumibol recruited scientifically trained intellectuals to work on his royal projects. M.R. Thepparit Devakul, who ran a royal rain-making project and technology development for the *Suan Chitlada* royal farm, was educated in agricultural engineering at the University of Maryland. Dr. Sumet Tantivejkul, who became head of the Chaipattana Foudation, earned a doctoral degree from the Université de Monpellier. Some technocrats and intellectuals who worked in the King's projects later became privy councilors.

Clerical intellectuals emerged through education in the monkhood, and serving as spiritual guides through preaching and through written works. For example, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu trained as an ascetic monk before becoming famous as a preacher and writer, honored both in Thailand and beyond.

Commoner intellectuals emerged in many fields including politics, economics, social issues, arts, education, history, development, environment preservation, international relations, and ethics. They included traditionalists, who often doubled as bureaucrats, technocrats, academics, creative artists in many fields, and practical intellectuals who concentrated on practical rather than theoretical issues. Examples include Saneh Chamarik, Prawase Wasi, Nidhi Eoseewong, Chatthip Nartsupha, Chai-Anan Samudavanija, Rangsan Thanaponpan, Thirayuth Bunmi, Anek Laothamatas, Chaiwat Satha-Anand, Suvinai Paranalai, Anand Panyarachun, and Sulak Sivaraksa (e.g., Charnvit, 2000: 115–6).

Many came from middle-class or upper middle-class families, and drew on the economic and cultural capital of their families. For example, the fathers of both Anand Panyarachun and Sulak Sivaraksa passed on their inheritance of economic and cultural capital to their sons through upbringing and through serving as role models. Sulak graduated from Assumption School and Saint David
School in England (Prasan, 1999 and Sulak, 1981). Others came from truly common backgrounds but were able, by their own talent, to gain education from elite institutions. For example, the poet and historian, Jit Phumisak, son of a railway employee, was educated at Triam Udom Sueksa School and Chulalongkorn University.

Some intellectuals were able to accumulate economic capital, especially if they could operate in English, gain an international reputation, or work for international organizations. Some acquired symbolic capital through prizes, honors, and other forms of recognition. Generally marriage did not play any special role in accumulating capital for them.

**Politicians**

Since 1932, bureaucratic and military leaders have played prominent roles in politics. Examples include Phraya Manopakorn Nititada, Phraya Phahon Phonphayuhasena, Phibun, Sarit, Thanom, General Prem Tinasulanond, General Suchinda Kraprayun, and General Sonthi Bunyaratklin. Leaders of elected government include M.R. Kukrit Pramoj, General Chatichai Chunhavan, Chuan Leekpai, Banharn Silapa-archa, and Thaksin Shinawatra.

Politicians fall into two groups by social origin. The first group originated from royal or aristocrat/bureaucrat families, and possessed the same types of capital, especially cultural capital in embodied and institutionalized states. For example, M.R. Sukhumbhand Paribatra, Tarrin Nimmanhaemin, Surakiart Sathirathai, and Abhisit Vejjajiva all graduated from either Harvard or Oxford University, and possessed high cultural, symbolic, social, and economic capital. Some seem to have entered politics as a duty of noblesse oblige. For example, M.R. Sukhumbhand Paribatra is a grandnephew of King Chulalongkorn, and sports a title and surname which publicize his royal lineage. He graduated from Oxford and became a lecturer at Chulalongkorn University before entering politics in the royal-associated Democrat Party. Similarly, M.R. Pridiyathorn Devakul also sports a royal title and surname, was educated at Wharton School, and has held high positions in finance and politics. Such figures possessed high levels of symbolic
and cultural capital in the forms of titles, manners, academic credentials, foreign language capabilities, bureaucratic experience, and so on. They also have economic capital in the form of the family's legacy of land and palaces.

The second group of politicians comes from business families. Their cultural and symbolic capitals are inferior to the first group, and their political careers are founded primarily on stocks of economic and social capital. They include both national-level businessmen as well as local figures. Sometimes they began as financiers of politics before participating personally. Many of the local politicians are construction contractors. Often they have entered politics as part of the cycle of accumulating economic capital. They form connections to established politicians and bureaucrats in order to win concessions, and may begin their political careers as vote canvassers before accumulating the funds to become direct participants. They accumulate social capital by building networks with other politicians, political parties, military officers, police officers, and elite bureaucrats. Some get the opportunity to attend the National Defense College. They also build networks in the locality among family, friends, business associates, and powerful figures in order to secure election and re-election. Sometimes they are able to transfer their political capital to spouse, sons, daughters, relatives, or friends (Pasuk and Baker, 2002: 447). Local political dynasties include the Silapa-archa family in Suphanburi province, Chidchob family in Buriram, and Khunpleum in Chonburi. Often they strengthen their networks with marriage ties. For example, the son of Suchinda Cherdchai, a transport tycoon, married the daughter of Phin Kiewphaisan, owner of the theme parks Safari World and Phuket Fantasia. More recently, members of such families have often married entertainment figures, perhaps benefitting from their spouse's cultural capital. For example, Chonsawat Asawahem married the well known singer, Nantida Kaewbuasai; and Puttipong Punnakan married the actress, Nusaba Vanichangkul.

Although, politicians of this second group begin with a lower stock of symbolic capital compared to royal family members and elite bureaucrats, they are able to build their own symbolic capital by virtue of repeated displays of public trust at elections and public
events. Agents confer on a person (or on an object) the very powers that they recognize in him (or it) (Bourdieu, 1992: 192). The holding of political office becomes a form of capital in itself.

Yet in Thai politics, cultural capital remains more important than economic capital and accumulated social capital. Anand Panyarachun came from an established aristocrat-bureaucrat family with royal associations, acquired high educational qualifications, and rose to high bureaucratic office, before being twice appointed to the premiership. He gained high social recognition, and was awarded a number of decorations, both Thai and foreign.

Conclusion

The characteristics of Thai elites' capital in the two periods, before and after the 1932 Revolution, were not much different. Members of the royal family, aristocrats, and bureaucrats had the largest stocks of capital, especially cultural and symbolic capitals. Overseas Chinese traders and businessmen had large stocks of economic capital, and in the later period politicians had symbolic capital. Intellectuals had low levels of economic capital but high levels of cultural, social, and symbolic capitals which differentiated them from other elite groups.

The economic capital of Thai elites was in the form of land, labor, business investments, cash, and property rights. Social capital was often formed by networking and alliance, both within and across groups. Business and marriage networks were common strategies to increase economic and social capital. Marriage alliances were used to consolidate networks within a group, to build connections to other elite groups, to accumulate wealth, and to emulate the cultural capital of royalty. Aristocrats, bureaucrats, and overseas Chinese liked to build connections with royalty because of royalty's stock of embodied capital that was difficult to replicate or imitate.

Elite educational institutions, both at home and abroad, were an important source of social and cultural capital, precisely because they were expensive and exclusive, and because they were an arena for forging elite social connections. In this sense, Thai elites resemble the French elites described by Bourdieu.
However, among Thai elites the three forms of cultural capital—in embodied, institutionalized, and objectified states—, were not the same as among French elites. First, the Thai royal family possessed a high stock of cultural capital in embodied forms such as possessions, ways of life, etiquette, cuisine, and costume. Second, whereas French elites make a point of patronizing “high culture” such as museums, concerts, galleries, only a very small minority of Thai elites patronize “high culture,” either Thai or international. Third, Thai elites created their own cultural capital to differentiate themselves from others, such as collections of rare objects like ivory boxes.

Members of the royal family were the first to pursue academic credentials from internationally prestigious educational institutions, and made it a distinctive part of their cultural capital. Other elite groups later appreciated the importance of this form of cultural capital and converted some of their economic capital into this form. As in Greece (Katsillis and Rubinson: 1990), the school was the place where reproduction of the social hierarchy occurred. Education was a form of capital in its own rights, as well as a first step towards the acquisition of other forms of capital, especially social and economic. However, the process was slow. Typically it took a family two to three generations to acquire an elite level of educational capital. Businessmen and politicians who were the new rich after the 1932 revolution were not fully accepted as elite because they lacked the indispensable cultural capital.

In Russia, academic credentials were a determinant of elite status both during the communist period and in its aftermath (Hanley, Yershova, Anderson, 1995). In France, institutions of higher education (ENA, ENS, Science-po, IUT, and IEP; see Bourdieu, 1998: 133–5), were more important in building elite status than secondary schools. In Thailand, the only educational institution important for developing elite status was the National Defense College (NDC). It was initially established to train elite military officers and bureaucrats, but was later extended to accommodate businessmen and politicians.

The outstanding objectified forms of cultural capital for Thai elites include royal decorations, and personal collections of rare objects. Both were rare. The highest royal decorations were granted
only to royal family members, privy councilors, bureaucrats, and individuals who serve the monarchy in special ways. Only lower grades of decoration were granted to politicians and businessmen, generally as rewards for charitable activities. The prestigious forms of personal collections were usually western in origin including paintings, expensive watches, and old cars. These collections identified their owners as both wealthy and worldly. Again the royal family provided the original role model. King Chulalongkorn and his family members popularized collection of ivory boxes.

Royal titles and surnames were a prominent form of symbolic capital that could not be imitated or achieved by conversion of economic capital. Subsequently other titles denoting high bureaucratic or political office (permanent secretary, former prime minister) became a new form of symbolic capital denoting personal achievement. In business, some prominent surnames and corporate names also acquired the status of symbolic capital.

In sum, the array of elite capitals in Thailand is rather similar to the French pattern described by Bourdieu. The only exception stems from the existence of a royal family with a specific stock of closely guarded cultural capital. The similarity in the characteristics of elite capital in the periods before and after the 1932 revolution seems to indicate that political change has not shifted the definition of elite capital, and that Thai elites have successfully deployed strategies to reproduce their stocks of capital (cf. Bourdien, 1998: 273–4).

Notes

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2 Bourdieu (1977a: 72) described *habitus* as follows: "*habitus*, systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without in any way presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operation necessary to attain them and, being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor."
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