

Introduction: Manners and the Thai Habitus

Kiriya sor chat marayat sor sakun.

Deportment and manners demonstrate breeding.¹

On 3 November 1928, an incident took place at a Bangkok train station, which attracted great public attention. Mr. Jongjaiphak and his family were hurrying to board the train to Hua Hin for a holiday. As he was lifting his luggage to load it through the window of the train, he was reprimanded by a minor aristocrat, Mom Jao Itthithepsan,² who told him that he should load his luggage through the train door. Mr. Jongjaiphak took no notice of him, whereupon Mom Jao Itthithepsan tried to grab him and a scuffle broke out between the two. Mom Jao Itthithepsan accused Mr. Jongjaiphak of dishonouring the aristocracy (*du min jao*) and the Chakri royal family. The situation deteriorated further when Mom Jao Itthithepsan's companion, Mr. Kaetti, punched Mr. Jongjaiphak and a fight ensued. Later, Mom Jao Itthithepsan petitioned King Prajadhipok to punish Mr. Jongjaiphak and his brother, who had accompanied him, for dishonouring the aristocracy in a public place by the act of lifting something over his head – a taboo in Thai etiquette³ – and by the subsequent fight. The king appointed five members of the nobility to investigate. On receiving their report, the king found in favour of Mom Jao Itthithepsan, ordering Mr. Jongjaiphak to be dismissed from government service and permitting damages to be sought. The story was written up in the newspapers amidst great public interest, 'no less than the interest in shootings taking place around the city'. A case of bad manners – lifting something above the head of an aristocrat – had constituted an affront to the

¹ *Sombat khong phu di* [Qualities of a Gentleperson], Supplementary Reading, Building Life Experience and Building Character Group, Primary School Curriculum, 30th ed. (Bangkok: Ministry of Education, 2001), 22. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the author's.

² 'Mom Jao' is a royal title, usually denoting a grandchild of the king.

³ This taboo is covered in the first and second of the 182 instructions of the most famous modern guidebook on manners, *Qualities of a Gentleperson*, 1.

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aristocracy and the monarchy. Four years later a coup brought an end to Siam's absolute monarchy.⁴

In Thailand a remarkably high value is placed on the performance of good manners. Conduct has long been a central concern of Thai society. Kings, aristocrats, prime ministers, senior monks, active as well as retired army generals, politicians, poets, novelists, education administrators, and journalists have produced a large corpus of literature that sets out models of appropriate behaviour. It teaches such things as how to stand, walk, sit, pay homage, prostrate oneself and crawl in the presence of high-status people, sleep, eat, manage bodily functions, dress, pay respect to superiors, deal with inferiors, socialize, use one's time, and how to work and play. These modes of conduct have been taught or enforced by families, the monastery, court society, and, in the twentieth century, by the state, the education system, the bureaucracy, and the mass media. How they have been formed historically is the subject of this book.

In this book manners are understood in a broad sense as the written and unwritten rules that govern the way people manage themselves and their relations with other people. There are various terms for manners in Thai, including *marayat*, *kiriya*, *jariya*, *janya*, *khwaam praphreut*, or with a greater emphasis on deportment, *iriyabot*. All have Pali origins, indicating that such terms entered the Thai language from Buddhist scripture.⁵ In the literature on proper conduct, manners are typically understood as covering the three fields of behaviour highlighted in Theravada Buddhist doctrine about how to master the self: bodily action (*kai*), speech (*waja*), and one's mental disposition (*jai*). The inculcation of good manners thus has as its objective the shaping of the whole person. Modern thinking about proper conduct, despite the outwardly secular ends to which it is directed, contains within it echoes of this older Buddhist teaching.

For centuries the high value given to politeness has not gone unnoticed by foreign visitors to the country, who typically devoted several pages to the subject of manners in their accounts of their travels. The French

⁴ Jirawat Saengthong, 'Chiwit prajamwan khong chao sayam nai krunthep phor. sor. 1426–2475' [Everyday Life of the Siamese in Bangkok, 1883–1932], Masters thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 194–5; drawn from Atcharaphorn Kamutpisamai, *Panha phai nai sangkhom thai korn kan pativaat 2465: phap sathorn jak ngan khian than nangsu phim* [Problems in Thai Society before 1932: Representations from Newspaper Writings] (Bangkok: Thai Khadi Sueksa, 1989).

⁵ The Pali word *marīyādā*, from which the Thai word for manners, *marayat*, is derived, is defined as 'boundary, limit, shore, embankment'. The term appears in well-known Buddhist scriptures in the Thai tradition such as the *Vinaya*, *Visuddhimagga*, *Milindapanha*, and *Dikhanikaya*; T. W. Rhys Davids and William Stede (eds.), *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1999), 524.

envoy La Loubère, who visited Siam in the late seventeenth century, included an entire chapter on the civility of the Siamese. ‘As to Civility’, he wrote, ‘it is so great throughout the East, even amongst Strangers, that an European who has liv’d there a long time, finds much difficulty to re-accustom himself to the Familiarities of these Countries’.⁶ The French Jesuit Guy Tachard, who visited Siam at the same time as La Loubère, remarked that, ‘The Siamese are very good natured and civil’.⁷ A century and a half later the French bishop Pallegoix, who had long resided in the kingdom, expressed a positive view of Siamese manners, albeit couched in terms of European civilizational superiority: ‘This nation is remarkable for its gentleness and humanity . . . The Thai receive foreigners with kindness. They are eager to please travellers’⁸ . . . Among a half-civilized people like the Thai, one would not expect to meet with so much politeness and civility’.⁹ For Western visitors the significance of manners went beyond social niceties but was bound up with conceptions of civilization.

More recent scholars have similarly noted the importance given to manners. Reid has argued that one of the defining characteristics of Southeast Asian societies generally is ‘the high value placed on civility and harmony in personal interactions and public life’.¹⁰ In her study of ideas of civilization in twentieth-century Thai society, Kepner remarks on the ‘nearly obsessive concern with how people look, move, stand, walk, sit, dress, and groom themselves’.¹¹ Van Esterik has argued for the importance of the concept of *kala thesa*, meaning a heightened awareness of social context, which guides how people dress, talk, and act.¹² But as Peleggi has pointed out, the historical dimension of this subject has received little scholarly attention, especially in explanations of twentieth-century nationalism:

while almost entirely overlooked by historians of Thailand, the domain of bodily practice – encompassing personal hygiene, dress, deportment, language and sex – represented a central aspect of the nation-building project initiated by the

⁶ Simon de la Loubère, *The Kingdom of Siam* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1986), 54.

⁷ Guy Tachard, *A Relation of the Voyage to Siam Performed by Six Jesuits Sent by the French King, to the Indies and China in the Year 1685* (Bangkok: White Orchid Press, 1985), 267.

⁸ Jean-Baptiste Pallegoix, *Description of the Thai Kingdom or Siam: Thailand under King Mongkut*, trans. Walter E. J. Tips (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2000), 104.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 104, 119.

¹⁰ Anthony Reid, *A History of Southeast Asia: Critical Crossroads* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 422.

¹¹ Susan Fulop Kepner, *A Civilized Woman: M. L. Boonlua Debyasuvarn and the Thai Twentieth Century* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2013), 18.

¹² Penny Van Esterik, *Materializing Thailand* (Oxford: Berg Press, 2000), 36–41.

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Bangkok monarchy at the turn of the century and continued, after the change of political system in 1932, by the bureaucratic-military elite.¹³

Governments of different political persuasions have harnessed the education system and the mass media to disseminate and enforce their favoured models of appropriate conduct. The military coups that have regularly punctuated Thailand's modern history since 1932 have typically been followed by campaigns to reform the behaviour of the citizenry and the youth. Conservative nationalists have been successful in depicting manners as being at the heart of what it means to be Thai. In one well-known manners manual of the 1970s, the Education Ministry's Cultural Bureau defined 'Thai manners' as,

the forms of deportment that express politeness, submission, and gentleness, which are the true characteristics of the Thai people. They form a part of our national culture and demonstrate that Thailand has a high culture.¹⁴

The teaching of manners naturally lends itself to political influence. By referring to this form of conduct as 'Thai manners', such behaviour is held up as natural and timeless as well as obligatory for Thai citizens. Thailand's lucrative international tourism industry has successfully exported this idea by commercializing the stereotypical image of the smiling Thai, both women and men, in the gesture of the *wai* – a traditional sign of deference and submission.

This conservative, in fact, courtly conception of proper conduct has largely defined Thai manners since the 1960s. Expected forms of deportment are an example of this with regard to: how one positions one's body height and maintains an appropriate distance in relation to one's interlocutor, the slowness and evenness of one's movements, the placement of the hands, the pleasantness of the facial expression, the gaze of the eyes, the softness of one's speech, the types of words one uses, the selection of pronouns and other words appropriate to one's social status, what one chooses not to say, one's inner mental disposition (especially maintaining a 'calm mind'). Proper deportment has a significance beyond the actions themselves. Performing good manners signifies one's acceptance of an idealized social order. Bad manners, by contrast, signifies a violation or even a rejection of that order.

¹³ Maurizio Peleggi, 'Refashioning Civilization: Dress and Bodily Practice in Thai Nation-Building' in Maurizio Peleggi and Mina Roces (eds.), *The Politics of Dress in Asia and the Americas* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2010), 65. See also Maurizio Peleggi, *Thailand: The Worldly Kingdom* (Reaction Books Ltd., 2007), 145–53.

¹⁴ 'Explanation', in M. L. Pi Malakul, *Rabiap kan sadaeng iriyabot tang tang an pen marayat thai* [Rules for Deportment in Thai Manners] (Bangkok: Culture Bureau, Division of Religion, 1974).

Today there is a strong official conception about what Thai manners mean. The term is closely associated with notions of servility (*orn norm*), gentility (*orn wan*), respect and deference (*samma kharawa*), discipline (*mi winai*), and orderliness (*khwaam riap roi*).

Manners as Embodied History

Manners are often trivialized as superficial gestures whose purpose is merely to lubricate the wheels of social interaction. They have received scant attention in the historical scholarship on Thailand or Southeast Asia more generally. In this book I understand manners to be an intrinsic element of what sociologists refer to as habitus. The concept dates back to Aristotle.¹⁵ It was discussed by medieval European Christian commentators such as Thomas Aquinas in treatises on Aristotle, and it has been developed since the late nineteenth century by European sociologists, particularly those trying to understand changes in personal conduct in the transition from religious to secular societies. Weber understood habitus as ‘a disposition to behave and view the world in a particular and distinctive manner’.¹⁶ His famous argument about the emergence of the ‘capitalist spirit’ concerned the formation of a certain habitus that was conducive to a capitalist-oriented economy and society.¹⁷ In discussions of habitus a distinction is often made between the relative influence on behaviour of ideas – especially with regard to ethics – and habits of bodily conduct. Another of sociology’s founders, Émile Durkheim, argued that,

it is not enough to direct our attention to the superficial portions of our consciousness; for the sentiments, the ideas which come to the surface are not, by far, those which have the most influence on our conduct. What must be reached are the habits ... these are the real forces which govern us.¹⁸

For Norbert Elias habitus was ‘second nature’, an ‘automatically functioning self-restraint’ that compels us even when we are alone.¹⁹ Importantly,

¹⁵ In his *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle writes, ‘moral virtue comes about as a result of habit ... Neither by nature, then, not contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit ... This is confirmed by what happens in states; for legislators make the citizens good by forming habits in them’; Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 23.

¹⁶ Richard Swedberg and Ola Agevall, *The Max Weber Dictionary: Key Words and Central Concepts*, 2nd ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 143.

¹⁷ Max Weber, ‘Anticritical Last Word on “The Spirit of Capitalism”’, *American Journal of Sociology* 83 (1978), 1124.

¹⁸ Émile Durkheim, *Education and Sociology* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1956), 152.

¹⁹ Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 117.

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habitus has an historical dimension. Marcel Mauss suggested that 'history and society, social ranks included, were inscribed upon our bodies and were thus daily performed by us'.²⁰ In a well-known passage, Durkheim contrasts the powerful force exercised by these 'past personae' on people's conduct beyond their consciousness, with much weaker present-day influences:

In each one of us, in differing degrees, is contained the person we were yesterday, and indeed, in the nature of things it is even true that our past *personae* predominate in us, since the present is necessarily insignificant when compared with the long period of the past because of which we have emerged in the form we have today. It is just that we don't directly feel the influence of these past selves precisely because they are so deeply rooted within us. They constitute the unconscious part of ourselves. Consequently, we have a strong tendency not to recognize their existence and to ignore their legitimate demands. By contrast, with the most recent acquisitions of civilization we are vividly aware of them just because they are recent and consequently have not had time to be assimilated into our collective unconscious.²¹

Habitus, therefore, is a remnant of the effects of past events upon people. The most influential writer on habitus in recent times, Pierre Bourdieu, highlighted the way in which history leaves, as it were, an imprint upon people's behaviour. He described habitus as 'embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history'.²² Following Durkheim, Elias, Mauss, and Bourdieu, we may think of a smile, a certain manner of walking, or even a type of look as an embodiment of the norms of a social and political order of a previous era. Bourdieu's work emphasized political influence on the formation of habitus. He describes 'bodily hexis' (i.e. habitus)²³ as 'a political mythology realized, *em-bodied*, turned into a permanent disposition, a durable manner of standing, speaking and thereby of *feeling* and *thinking*':

The principles *em-bodied* in this way are placed beyond the grasp of consciousness, and hence cannot be touched by voluntary, deliberate transformation, cannot even be made explicit; nothing seems more ineffable, more incommunicable, more inimitable, and, therefore, more precious, than the values given body, *made* body by the transubstantiation achieved by the hidden persuasion of an implicit pedagogy, capable of instilling a whole cosmology, an ethic, a metaphysic, a political

²⁰ As summarized in Rafael F. Narváez, *Embodied Collective Memory: The Making and Unmaking of Human Nature* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2013), 11.

²¹ Émile Durkheim, 'The History of Secondary Education in France' in *Selected Writings on Education, Volume II, The History of Educational Thought: Lectures on the Formation and Development of Secondary Education in France* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 11–12.

²² Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 56.

²³ Habitus is the Latin translation of the Greek *hexis*.

philosophy, through injunctions as insignificant as ‘stand up straight’ or don’t hold your knife in your left hand.²⁴

The endless discussion and contestation about manners in Thailand may therefore be understood as debates about the Thai habitus.²⁵ The Buddhist doctrine of disciplining one’s bodily actions, speech, and mental disposition (*kai waja jai*) that is implicit and often explicit in the didactic literature on manners comes close to Western thinking surrounding the concept of habitus. If we consider manners as an embodiment of an ideal conception of social order, this explains why norms of conduct receive such attention, are so rigorously enforced, and, indeed, have been bitterly fought over. Rather than thinking of modern Thai history as subject to and shaped by abstract political ideologies – for example, royalism, republicanism, nationalism, socialism, democracy, or ‘authoritarianism’ – this book will argue that attention ought to be given to habitus as a force governing people’s actions. Habitus encompasses actual habits of bodily conduct, speech, and thought that have been formed historically, and which usually operate beyond conscious reflection.

Manners and Civilization

Many stories and living eye-witnesses report that in the twenty years of his rule he killed and had killed by law more than 80,000 people, excluding those who were victims of war. Whether on an elephant, on horseback, in a *perahu* [boat], or even on his throne in a meeting with his mandarins, [King Naresuan] was never without a weapon. He always had a quiver resting on his lap and a bow in hand. When he saw someone who did the least thing which did not please him, he shot an arrow at the offender and asked that person to bring the arrow to him. He often had pieces of flesh sliced off from those (even among mandarins) who committed the smallest mistakes and had them eat their flesh before his very eyes. He made others eat their own feces.

Van Vliet, 1640(?)²⁶

²⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 94.

²⁵ The concept of habitus lacks theorization in Thai historical studies. The Thai term that comes closest to habitus is perhaps *jarit*, derived from the Pali *carita*, meaning behaviour, temperament, or good conduct; Davids and Stede (eds.), *The Pali-English Dictionary*, 263.

²⁶ Jeremias Van Vliet, ‘The Short History of Occurrences in the Past and the Succession of the Kings of Siam as far as Is Known from the Old Histories’ in Chris Baker, Dhiravat Na Pombejra, Alfons van der Krann, and David K. Wyatt (eds.), *Van Vliet’s Siam* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2005), 229. The editors date the composition of the chronicle to between 1636 and 1640.

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The gentleperson should be kind-hearted . . . (i) they should not aggravate someone's misfortune; (ii) they should help those who are in trouble; (iii) they should be magnanimous towards others; (iv) they should not think vengeful thoughts.

Qualities of the Gentleperson, 1900²⁷

Despite the evidently high value that Thais have long placed on civility, we have little understanding of how notions of appropriate conduct have changed over time. This book focuses on the period from approximately the mid-nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth. It proposes that manners are not, as is commonly thought, something that are inherent in a timeless Thai cultural identity or Buddhist tradition. Rather, they are connected to specific political and social changes that have transformed the Thai polity since the second half of the nineteenth century. Rather than denoting old-fashioned notions of desirable social etiquette, manners in Thailand in the modern period are better understood as binding, state-sanctioned codes of normative behaviour. Over the course of the twentieth century conduct has been highly contested between competing political forces and ideological visions. Manners have become politicized and the pressure to conform is acute.

Manners, civility, courtesy, and culture have for a long time been closely bound up with notions of civilization. Civilization, often rendered in Thai as *siwilai*, has been a perennial theme in the study of how Thailand has come to terms with modernity.²⁸ Scholars have placed particular emphasis on the part played by the West in justifying its imposition of colonial rule by appeals to a civilizing mission. Much of the scholarly literature on Thailand's encounter with European colonialism over the last four decades is permeated by nationalist or postcolonial sentiment. This literature is critical of the Western colonial powers for setting up a culturally specific standard of civilization that Thailand and other colonized peoples must strive for.²⁹ Such standards are supposedly imposed on colonized or developing countries by means of economic

²⁷ Anusorn jaophraya phrasadet surenharathibodi (*Mor. Ror. Pia Malakun*) *Senabodi krasuang thammakan phor. Sor. 2454–2458* [In Commemoration of Chaophraya Phrasadet Surenharathibodi (M.R. Pia Malakul) Head of the Ministry of Public Instruction, 1911–15] (Bangkok: Committee for the Commemoration of the 100th Anniversary of the Birth of Chaophraya Phrasadet Surenharathibodi, 1967), 19.

²⁸ For the Thai case see Thongchai Winichakul, 'The Quest for *Siwilai*: A Geographical Discourse of Civilizational Thinking in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Siam', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 59:3 (August 2000), 528–49.

²⁹ See especially Rachel V. Harrison and Peter A. Jackson (eds.), *The Ambiguous Allure of the West: Traces of the Colonial in Thailand* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press; Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2010).

domination and cultural hegemony and characterize these societies as the passive recipients, or imitators, or adaptors of Western ‘civilization’.

If the postcolonial critique sees norms of conduct in Thailand as pale imitations of a hegemonic West, the conservative nationalist view promoted by royalists and the state bureaucracy is that Thai manners are the ancient, transcendent essence of a Thai identity, which values servility and deference.

Both critiques miss the central argument of Norbert Elias’s classic work, *The Civilizing Process*, which argues that civilization is to be understood as the progressive adoption by individuals of higher standards of self-restraint due to changes in the social, economic, and political structure of their societies over time. As Elias argues, ‘the particular standard of behavioural controls at a given period is connected to the structure of social functions and to changes in relationships between people’.³⁰ People’s behaviour and psychological outlook change when the networks of what Elias calls ‘interdependence’ change due to increasing political consolidation and economic complexity.³¹ The tired critique of European colonialism’s supposed imposition of Western civilization or Western cultural influence on Thai society has overlooked how changes in relationships of interdependence and social function *within Thai society itself* have affected both the management of the self and codes of everyday social interaction. This book argues that internal factors are the main driver of changes in conduct in Thailand.

To illustrate how this model for understanding changes in habitus may be adapted to the Thai historical context, a brief summary of Elias’s argument is required.

One of the key ideas in Elias’s understanding of the development of norms of conduct, influenced by his reading of Weber and Freud, is that historically manners are related to the development of a monopoly of force: opportunities for the use of violence to achieve one’s aims become progressively more limited, and one’s behaviour is more and more constrained by outside factors such as coercive force, the law, and – more commonly – social pressure. Over time these constraints become internalized and become self-restraints. The movement over time is thus towards increased levels of self-control and a more complex and refined management of one’s relations with others.

In *The Civilizing Process* Elias identified three major transformations in the history of manners in Western Europe. The first was a shift from the near anarchy of so-called feudal society to the consolidation of princely courts, dating from around the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries. Elias

³⁰ Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, 439. ³¹ *Ibid.*, 365–79.

argues that, in the era when the knightly class was the dominant social group, behaviour was less restrained when judged by modern standards. As a social class the life of knights was defined by the use of violence. Conflicts were typically resolved through resort to violence. This comparatively freer environment for acting upon one's desires began to change, however, with the emergence of princely courts. The knightly class, weakened by the growing power of regional princes and their developing monopolies over taxation and the use of violence, was gradually forced to submit to the power of these princes and come into their service at the great feudal courts. There they learned to curb their aggressive impulses to conform to the higher standards of self-control required in courtly society. It is from here that the term 'courtesy' derives: how to behave at court and 'make oneself favourable in the eyes of a prince'.³² Within this new social context, knights began to self-consciously distinguish their behaviour from that of peasants.

To illustrate this process Elias gives examples of changes in eating etiquette, such as the shift to having meat carved up into portions *before* it was brought to the table, restrictions on the use of the knife, and the introduction of the fork as an eating utensil. Over time there is an increase in the 'threshold of repugnance' associated with bodily functions, which leads, for example, to the use of handkerchiefs for clearing the nose and sanctions against spitting.³³ Behaviour that was once performed openly, unselfconsciously, and without shame, such as urination, passing wind, appearing nude, and even engaging in sexual relations, is increasingly relegated to the private sphere. All of these changes demonstrate the heightening standards of behavioural control. According to Elias, 'not only within the Western civilizing process, but as far as we can see within every major civilizing process, one of the most decisive transitions is that of warriors to courtiers'.³⁴

The second great transformation was the consolidation of these princely courts into the great territorial monarchies of the absolutist period, from around the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. 'Courtesy' gives way to 'civility'.³⁵ The example Elias dwells on the most is France during the *Ancien Régime*, especially during the reign of King Louis XIV, when a courtly society centred on the monarch achieved its greatest expression. The great noble families, which had once presided over courts of their own, were all eventually forced to submit themselves to the absolute monarchy. The court in Versailles became the centre of so-called good society. In court society, survival and social advancement

³² Ibid., 10. ³³ For 'threshold of repugnance' see *ibid.*, 98. ³⁴ Ibid., 389.

³⁵ Ibid., 88.