

The Mourning of Rama IX

by

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Date: November 17, 2021

Approved:



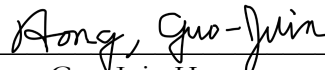
Diane Nelson, Supervisor



Ara Wilson



Ralph Litzinger



Guo-Juin Hong

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
Cultural Anthropology in the Graduate School
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ABSTRACT

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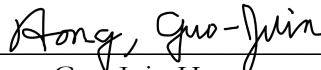
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Abstract

This dissertation is an anthropological study of the mourning of Thailand's King Bhumibol Adulyadej. Bhumibol's reign spanned from the end of World War II, through the Indochina conflict, and into the 21st century. The only king most Thais had ever known in their lifetimes, he was widely revered and held in kind of sacred intimacy, both national father and holy Buddhist monarch. At 88 years old, his passing was not wholly unexpected, but nonetheless marked a moment of profound historical significance. With the king's death, the country entered an official, year-long period of mourning, which is the object of this study.

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a rare and special quality in a scholar and colleague, and I'm truly grateful for both your insights and the encouragement that your enthusiasm brought me.

Finally, my deepest gratitude to Diane Nelson, Ara Wilson, Ralph Litzinger and Guo Jun Hong. I would not have been able to complete this dissertation if it weren't for all of you and each of you. To put into words here how each of you has shaped me as an anthropologist and scholar would strain the limitations of professional, scholarly conduct – or, at the very least, be a grossly conspicuous departure from the genre-form of the acknowledgements page. I look forward to the opportunity to express that to each of you personally in the near future. Here, I will simply say that with gratitude I will forever, to all of you, have *bunkhun*.

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Introduction

“How much for this?” the woman asked, holding up a black tee shirt she had lifted it from a rack of other black tee shirts interspersed with dark gray and white. It seemed she hadn’t noticed or chose to ignore the sign, hand-written in magic marker, that said, ‘tee shirts 280’. The woman and the friend she was with were both middle aged, dressed in black slacks and loose black blouses, not unlike those hanging from the sparser rack next to the tee shirts. Around us people queued at sidewalk food carts and lingered at the sundry vendors’ stalls wedged in between to catching passing business from office workers come down from the office towers above for lunch.

“280.”¹ The vendor answered calmly, not looking up from the piles of black, white, and gray clothes in cellophane bags she was unpacking from a large plastic bin and arranging in neat stacks on the wooden platform in front of her that kept them a mere but important ten or so inches off the sidewalk. She was about the same age as the women, but with features and a darker complexion that suggested a rural, working class heritage.

“280?” the potential customer replied. Behind her muted tone, her voice sounded skeptical. To her credit, the price was slightly higher the 200 or 250 baht tee shirts would usually go for.

“Yes, that’s right. 280.”

It was around noon on Tuesday, October 18. Nearly a week had gone by since the death of Thailand’s king, Bhumibol Adulyadej, the Thursday before. His reign spanned from the end of World War II, through Indochina conflict, and into the 21st century. The only

¹ About USD \$9.00

king most Thais had ever known in their lifetimes, he was widely revered and held in kind of sacred intimacy, both national father and holy Buddhist monarch. At 88 years old, his passing was not wholly unexpected, but the announcement of his death was met with shock, confusion and a genuine outpouring of grief.

With the king's death, the country entered an official, year-long period of mourning. For the last few days, the country had been confronted with questions large and small raised by Bhumibol's passing. How does one mourn a divine king? And what role would the Thai public play in the process? What would the future of the nation look like? In the days, weeks, and months that followed, mourning the king became a central and ubiquitous feature of public life. Schools, universities, and businesses would hold ceremonies to honor and swear loyalty to the beloved monarch, malls would host commemorative exhibitions on his great works, and people throughout the country would make pilgrimage to pay their respects before the royal urn at the Grand Palace, as his gilt crematorium was build over the course of the year.

Now, however, at this hot, ad-hoc, lunchtime market beneath the office towers abutting Ari skytrain station, these women's attention was focused on the most universal if not the most pressing of everyday practicalities of the mourning period: acquiring black clothes to last a year. Topics related to mourning attire featured largely in the media and public conversation over the past few days. Among these were rumors and widespread concerns about unscrupulous vendors taking advantage of the nation's grief by inflating the price of black clothes. Social media and office gossip were rife with discussion of mostly imagined or hypothetical price-gouging. So hot was the topic that over the weekend the government made public statements admonishing merchants to keep prices fair and

announced official investigations in response to a slew of complaints filed with police around the country.

The customer pursed her lips, darted a quick look at her friend, and the two women began to whisper to each other. The street was unusually quiet, the hum of cars and motorcycles the only familiar sound, absent the noise of radios, televisions, and digital billboards now all turned off, and the chatter of human voices fallen silent or greatly hushed in deference to the King and to a bereaved nation. I wondered if she was going to push the issue any further. To even indirectly suggest what she seemed to be thinking — obvious as it was — felt to me like it would be incommensurate with the tacit agreement behind the somber public atmosphere. The king's passing had occasioned more than a collective outpouring of grief. Many saw the King as the sole uniting figure of an otherwise divided nation, seemingly trapped in an endless cycle of elections and coups, protests and counter-protests. His benevolent guidance or his subjects' love and gratitude towards him were felt to be the only thing preventing these long-simmering political tensions from boiling over. In this uncertain atmosphere, equal parts grief and fear, maintaining an orderly public calm became even more important than usual. It was a way of performing and, in so doing, preserving a national unity deemed very fragile at the time. Anything as confrontational as an even implied accusation seemed a violation of the silent public consensus on what constituted proper public behavior in these early days after the king's death.

Before the woman said anything else, however, the vendor, having finished arranging her wares, spoke first. "I wish I could sell these for less, but I'm not getting much as is. I had to find someone to pick them up from the factory and drive them here overnight." After a brief pause when no one spoke, she added, "They're hard to get. We're all... we're all

dressing like this.” The media had been reporting on the mad scramble retails and market vendors had been going through to meet the sudden surge of demand for black clothes — perhaps an attempt to quell suspicion or at least encourage sympathy in transactions like these. I wondered in passing what similar arrangements and accommodations the vendor’s distributor or the factory owner had to go through themselves to get these black clothes produced and to market in such short time. Harried phone calls to suppliers to track down black fabric and thread? Frantic negotiation with customs officials and international shipping agents? Meetings with factory workers and union representatives to figure out who would work overtime?

Still looking unsatisfied, the customer again pursed her lips, but her friend, who was apparently less suspicious, perhaps more sympathetic, or at least more concerned with maintaining a calm and harmonious public atmosphere, took the shirt from her hands, and, lifting another from the rack, gave the vendor a faint smile, handed them both to her, and said “We’ll take these two.”

I lingered as the vendor put the shirts in plastic bags, took the women’s money, and issued change. When they had left, I asked her, curious, “Are a lot of people complaining about the prices?” She put her hands on her hips and I noticed for the first time the black tee shirt she was wearing, something apparently pulled from her existing wardrobe, a bit faded with age and the words “*HOT STUFF!*” emblazoned in white across the chest. She attempted a smile that resulted in more of a grimace and exhaled sharply through her nose, this minor sign of frustration the actual answer to my question. “Some, but not many,” she said in a soft voice, then bent over to straighten a stack of shirts. “Most people are very nice.”

For her to complain about dealing with pushy customers or suspicious sidelong glances would be no less a violation of the public calm. I nodded my head, and, feeling suddenly obliged, picked out a shirt I hadn't intended to buy and paid for it.

This brief encounter reflected a number of related themes that would become a central part of everyday life in the year of mourning. First, the customers' suspicions about price-gouging on the sale of black clothes was part of a wider set of concerns and anxieties people felt about the possibility of profiting from mourning-related activities. Bhumibol was held up as a model of the ideal Buddhist layman,² who was seen to have led and, in fact, taught his subjects through his own personal example of hard work and self-sacrifice for the benefit of the nation. As such, the idea that anyone — be it others or oneself — would benefit financially from his mourning was not only distasteful because it would be profiting off the death of a beloved monarch or taking advantage of the nation's grief, but because seeking personal gain from the mourning of the King would be a direct violation of the selfless virtue he represented.

Second, the vendor's efforts to get ahold of black clothes to sell — and the efforts of her overnight delivery driver — reflected a wider practice of turning to work as a means of honoring the late king. Such labor was part of a mourning ethic that cohered almost immediately following the king's death, one which valued stoic perseverance in the face of grief, and encouraged hard work and dedication to duty as the proper way to mourn. On one hand it seemed remarkable that the nation so quickly seemed to pull itself together and return to work. Everyone I spoke with was surprised, after expecting the king's passing

² i.e., not a monk.

would entail a major departure from everyday life, that the government did not announce a bank holiday, and businesses were open the very next day. On the other hand, it was completely in keeping with the values the king was seen to represent. In the 1960s and 1970s, Bhumibol took an active role in the country's development, working with the state to bring roads, electricity, schools, and hospitals to the rural north and northeast. As Thailand's economy boomed, the king was lauded throughout his reign for bringing progress and prosperity to the nation. His efforts of this era became a central feature of state ideology and palace propaganda. The tireless and dedicated king who sacrifices himself for the benefit of the nation, this image was held up to his subjects as an ideal of diligence, duty, and nation-over-self towards which they should strive in their everyday lives.

Finally, mourning the King was more than a collective coming together in the name of transcendent values of unity and nation. It was also a thoroughly material process deeply embedded in Thailand's capitalist system of production, whether it took the form of civic volunteerism, state-organized ritual, workplace ceremonies, visual forms of commemoration, or simply the daily practice of wearing black. Image-shrines had to be erected, billboards put up, and meals cooked. Clothing and commemorative Rama IX consumer goods from phone cases, tee shirts, and stickers to designer couture and jewelry had to be designed, made, and distributed. Exhibitions and sculptural displays had to be created and set up, television specials, documentaries, talk shows, and news programs produced and broadcast, commemoration ceremonies planned and executed, and corporate sponsored condolence messages designed, printed, uploaded, and aired. All of this required the labor of countless designers, florists, printers, craftsmen, chefs, webmasters, media industry workers, delivery drivers, factory laborers, middle-men distributors, line cooks, merchants, market vendors,

retail sales staff, and more. As mourning and commemoration grew increasingly elaborate, encompassing multiple aspects of daily life, more and more of the Thai workforce was pulled into the material production of mourning. Very quickly, that is, many more people than just the working class clothing vendors subject to so much bourgeois suspicion found themselves working in an occupational capacity on some aspect of mourning or commemoration, and, thus, in a position to profit or otherwise financially gain from mourning-related activities.

Concerns and anxieties about profiting off of mourning the king, I argue, are symptomatic of a dialectical tension (Tambiah 1973) in the ideology of modern Thai kingship built around Rama IX. The tension pertains to the king's dual role as a Buddhist moral exemplar and teacher who led his subjects through his own righteous daily conduct, and the head of state of a modern nation deeply entangled in the global capitalist economy. In the first, Bhumibol was seen as an embodiment of Buddhist virtue, the ideal, world-renouncing layman. His widely extolled modest lifestyle is held up to his subjects as a model of non-attachment, and his service to the nation and civic-oriented royal charities presented as a practice of sacrifice (*borijak*) and selfless giving (*dana*) in a Buddhist idiom. In the second, he is held to be an industrious, hard-working, and capable modern administrator whose leadership and guidance are credited for leading the nation to industrial development and bringing about national prosperity — which, in a modern, capitalist system, means capitalist prosperity by capitalist measures. In these two capacities, that is, the King is at one time seen to be both above the vulgar, this-worldly concerns of wealth and capitalist materialism, and at the very core of material, capitalist processes.

In some ways this ideology seems like a natural evolution of traditional kingship in

Southeast Asia, which has long emphasized the king's moral perfection and connected his rule to earthly prosperity. The Thai king was the protector and patron of the Buddhist Sangha³. At the apex of the layman's path to salvation, through his rule he strove to practice the ten kingly virtues. By building and restoring temples and sponsoring rituals, the righteous king supported a thriving Sangha who could teach and spread the *dhamma*. Through these practices, he ordered his kingdom as an ideal *dhamma*-realm, and brought peace, harmony and prosperity to his kingdom. And what is peace harmony and prosperity in the 20th and 21st centuries if not a booming national economy? At the same time, however, the specific form of this ideology emerged from very specific historical circumstances and the king's role in promoting capitalist development in the post- World War II era, as the state sought to encourage rural Thais to take up commercial farming and wage labor.

While present through much of his reign, I suggest that Bhumibol's death brought this tension to the fore, and throughout the mourning year it continually resurfaced. Mourning the king was seen as an act of thanking and repaying the king for years of dedication, and as people strove to live up to his moral example the nation turned to work as a way to mourn. While hard work and dedication to duty was seen as a proper form of mourning, such labor, in keeping with Bhumibol's virtuous example, was seen as a form of sacrifice and contribution to the national mourning process, not as self-interested economic activity. This was even more the case when work was directly connected to mourning, and thus many people intentionally rejected payment or profit, or expressed discomfort when they found themselves financially benefiting from mourning-related projects. Put otherwise,

³ "The Sangha" refers to the collectivity of Buddhist monks, or the monkhood, similar to the use of the phrase "the church" in English in reference to the wider institution of Christianity.

when put into practice in a capitalist system, the selfless dedication to duty and hard work encouraged in the mourning ethic of soldiering on sometimes produced contradictory results: personal financial gain in the form of profits or wages that sat awkwardly against the king's message of self-sacrifice and for the betterment of the nation.

This dissertation examines Thailand's year of mourning to explore this tension in the Thai kingship and other issues raised by the king's death. It is framed by the question of how people learned how to mourn. Bhumibol's extraordinarily long reign meant there was virtually no living memory of the last king's death in 1946. Anyone old enough to remember it with clarity would have been in their mid eighties, as old as the King himself, and such memory had little applicability to the present circumstances. At the time of Bhumibol's ascension, the monarchy was politically disenfranchised, its future role in Thai society uncertain, and its reputation among at least portions of the elite and middle class far from the position of semi-sacred reverence that marked the latter decades of his reign. More importantly, in Bhumibol's seventy years on the throne, Thailand had transformed from an agrarian nation of peasant-farmers to an industrialized, middle income country with a modern, educated population. And the most pressing and uncertain questions were not about participation in unfamiliar royal funerary rites or other ceremonial aspects of recognizing the King's death. The construction of the royal crematorium and the details of the cremation ceremony were in the hands of the military junta and palace, who, with the aid of an enthusiastic media, quickly set about on a nationwide campaign to inform and educate people on when and how to take part in the central rituals of mourning. The greatest uncertainty, rather, was about how to mourn and commemorate the King in everyday life - life which bore little resemblance to that of seventy years ago.

And yet while the military government managed the central, ritual elements of the mourning year with precision, it handled daily aspects of mourning in the wider public sphere with a markedly light touch. Government statements about public mourning practices tended to be vague and open-ended. It was an approach of guidelines, not rules, suggestions, not mandates. As a result, the details of what constituted proper (and, importantly, *sufficien*) mourning were left open to interpretation. Moreover, outside of the palace pilgrimage site, the state refrained from any kind of surveillance or official enforcement of mourning practices. Notably, there were a record zero *lèse majesté* cases charged during the twelve-month mourning period. Consequently, public mourning practices were subject to social, not official/legal, policing and enforcement.

Compounding these factors was another kind of uncertainty: uncertainty about how to speak about the king's death outside of one's own intimate circles. Speech and conduct pertaining to the monarchy had long been subject to social constraints governing time and place (and, of course, legal mechanisms), and the subject of the King's death was strictly taboo. The mourning period was an unprecedented situation, and no one knew exactly how speech norms would be affected. In other words, the king's death may have made the unspeakable speakable, but no one wanted to ask too many questions about how, exactly, to mourn and honor the late king.

Chapter One examines these long held social constraints on speech about the king by looking at the time period immediately surrounding the announcement of his death. It begins with an apparent paradox: the media was forbidden from reporting any unofficial information about the king's health, and in the days leading up to the announcement, the government and palace hadn't uttered a word. Nonetheless, when the official announcement

was made on October 13, at 7:00, broadcast over every television station, it seemed the entire nation already knew what was coming. Taking this as a starting point to examine speech and taboo more broadly, I look at how online visual modes of communication — in particular, well-wishing memes and mourning memes — serve to bypass the direct linguistic register of taboo and communicate what is otherwise unspeakable.

The remainder of this introduction introduces lays historical groundwork for this dissertation. We begin with the campaign of capitalist development mentioned above, which — not incidentally — had Bhumibol as its public face.

The future of the monarchy had been uncertain since 1932, when a coup staged by commoner elites in the military and state bureaucracy consigned the king to a ceremonial role and sent the royal family into self-imposed exile in Europe. The coup-makers sided with Japan and Germany in the war, and the allied victory gave the monarchy a chance to carve out a new position for itself in the postwar order. As revolutionary and communist movements began to spread through the former colonial world, the United States took an active interest in cultivating Thailand, the only never-colonized country in Southeast Asia, as a trading partner and ally of the capitalist West. For the United States, the young Bhumibol offered a potent national symbol in the fight against communism, while for Bhumibol, an alliance with the United States offered an opportunity to rebuild the power and prestige of the throne.

In the late 1950s the Thai state embarked on a massive program of capitalist development, backed by the United States, with Bhumibol as its public face⁴. Its goals were

⁴ For Bhumibol's developmental activities of the 1960s and 1970s, unless otherwise stated, I draw largely on Thak (1979), Gray (1986), and Pasuk and Baker (1998).

to open new markets to business and alleviate some of the hardship that might otherwise drive recruitment by the Communist Party of Thailand; for Bhumibol it was a way to cultivate a support base among the rural majority to counter extant anti-royalist factions of the state in Bangkok. Funded by the United States and planned under the guidance of American economic advisors, the government built roads, dams, hospitals, schools and electricity grids in the country's rural north and northeast, paving the way for factories, banks, and commercial agriculture. Through the 1960s and into the 1970s Bhumibol toured every province of his kingdom overseeing and providing hands-on guidance to development projects. Media coverage showed the king trudging through humid jungles, surveying his kingdom on sun-bleached hilltops with map and pencil in hand, and meeting his subjects close up and in person, as no Thai king had ever done before. They portrayed him as a benevolent national father, bringing the gifts of roads and schools to remote villages, long neglected by the central government in Bangkok. His efforts were portrayed as tireless dedication to his children, the Thai people, self-sacrifice for the benefit of the Thai nation.

But the Thai state was faced with a problem. How to get people to give up familiar ways of life and join in this new capitalist market economy they were building? The state had specific economic goals to increase agricultural exports and increase the role of industry as an overall component of the economy. For that, they needed people to grow more crops and work in factories. The rural economy at the time, particularly in the Issan region where development efforts were targeted, was a mixture of folk and kin economies that consisted largely of subsistence farming. Small-holdings farmers and village communes produced for consumption at the village level, while engagement with a capitalist market economy was at a local or regional level, with surplus for sale mainly to provide goods that couldn't be

produced locally. And, it was one thing to bring roads, schools, and hospitals to remote villages. It was quite another to ask villagers to learn new farming techniques, take out loans to buy new farming equipment, and to spend their time off working in a factory. People, it seemed, were quite content to keep on living as they had been and didn't see any good reason to start doing all this extra work. For the state, coercion by any means, especially dispossession was out of the question. Stripping farmers of their land ran contrary to the program's political goals of deterring communist recruitment, and Bhumibol's goals of building a rural support base. Better for all (not least, rural Thais) if people were convinced, rather than coerced, into participation in this new capitalist economy.

In this way, Bhumibol came to play a central role in promoting and encouraging market activity as a collective national effort, calling upon his subjects to work hard for nation. To fully appreciate how it worked, however, we have to briefly examine a tension between Theravada Buddhism and the values of the capitalist market economy. The profit motive at the core of economic theory rests on assumptions about human nature and values; it assumes that people seek their own self-interest and that self-interest is measured in material, economic terms. Sahlins refers to this capitalist subjectivity presumed by the discipline of economics *Homo Economicus*, a semi-satirical term meant to capture how human nature – and thus the “rational” actor of capitalism – is assumed to be calculating and acquisitive. Buddhism, notably, makes very similar assumptions about human nature: that we are selfish and greedy, driven by desire and material gain — only for Buddhism this is the opposite of rational; human nature is a base carnality to be overcome. I'm not, however, suggesting a kind of Weberian incompatibility based on other-worldly orientation or some such. The problem, rather, is that capitalism's core assumptions about human nature and

values are built in to the institutions and practices of market economies, including wage labor — which absent coercion by need offers only the promise of more money than one would otherwise have. The guiding principle of Theravada ethics — and Buddhist ethics more generally — is selfless action; a person’s intention in doing any action is a large part of determining that action’s moral value. For any deed to be good requires that the doer approach it with pure (read: selfless) intention, which is understood against the desire for personal benefit or personal gain. We see this at play in ritual merit-making, where pure intention is directly tied to the amount of merit generated by the ritual, and in far more everyday contexts of how people understood doing and being good.

This presents an obvious tension to the values inherent in the capitalist market economy. To be clear, however, the issue is not with wage labor or commercial farming as practices; there’s no core principle of Theravada Buddhism that conflicts with the idea of workers being paid for labor or farmers for crops. Rather, the issue is with valorizing the acquisitive human nature assumed by and built into wage labor and markets; the “intention” part of “pure intention,” or the “motive” part of “profit-motive.” Here, it may be useful to consider this against Adam Smith’s famous claim — which is both an economic claim and moral one — that everyone pursuing their own self interest will produce a collective prosperity for all. The second half of this equation — collective prosperity — presents no issue to Theravada Buddhism whatsoever. In fact, it resonates with historical and contemporary Theravada ideas of selfless action, a point I will return to in Chapter 5. The first half of the proposition — everyone pursuing their own self interest — is only problematic insofar as it concerns the self-interest. It’s the intention or motive that’s the issue, not the economic practices themselves. Simply put, there’s almost no way to reconcile

selfless action and self-interest. The idea of pursuing personal gain runs contrary to core Buddhist principles.

This conflict matters, moreover, because we're dealing with a very specific problem in very specific historical circumstances: the King needed people to produce more, and the market economy they were building offered only wages and profits as enticement, which didn't seem to be doing the trick. The king, however, is supposed to a paragon of Buddhist virtue who embodies and practices Buddhist moral values. It was out of the question for Bhumibol to encourage his subjects to grow crops for export and take wage up labor in the dry season by extolling the personal benefit it would bring them. To exhort his subjects to pursue their own material self-interest, even in the context of the capitalist promise that it would lead to collective prosperity, would be a radical departure from the existing value system. The monarchy was still rebuilding its prestige, so even if such an approach were effective towards achieving its material aims, it could easily be used by antagonistic factions in Bangkok to delegitimize Bhumibol and the monarchy itself.⁵

The Thai state, however, didn't need people to pursue their own self-interest. They needed people to work in factories and produce more crops. The solution to this dilemma was to present "development" as a collective national effort⁶ with the king at its helm. To this end, in speeches and royal addresses, Bhumibol encouraged his subjects to join with him in working hard to develop the nation. The media, meanwhile, urged people "follow in the

⁵ What I'm trying to convey here is that the conflict between Buddhist values and the capitalist market economy only manifests as a problem within and because of these specific circumstances. They present a constraint on how the King is able to encourage production and participation in the market economy. I mean this in contrast to a kind of Weberian suggestion that the problem is Buddhist values constraining rural people from taking up wage labor and commercial farming (at least in a direct sense of overt moral opposition).

⁶ Development was also often tied to preserving national sovereignty, tapping into historical narratives of narrowly avoiding colonization.

king's footsteps," an invocation of the monarch's traditional role as the paragon of virtue. The king's subjects were encouraged "to repay his dedication and generosity" through hard work and service to the nation, implicitly invoking the king's image as a "national father", calling upon people's *bunkun*, a sense of filial gratitude and obligation to one's seniors, especially parents. Most crucially, as with Bhumibol's efforts, working to develop the nation was described as sacrifice (*borijak*). This is the same word used for renunciatory gifts in ritual merit-making.

It's important to note that although this campaign sought to encourage voluntary participation in the market economy, the dispossession the state sought to avoid was occurring simultaneously throughout the 1960s and 1970s, simply through the mechanisms of the market economy. As roads and other capitalist infrastructure moved upcountry, wealthy urbanites and powerful military officers increasingly bought up land on the cheap from rural people with little experience with money. Our concern here, however is not with how successful this campaign was at achieving its aims (versus how much those aims were achieved by dispossession). Our concern, rather, is with how it impacted the ideology built around Bhumibol's kingship, and how working for the king was readily taken up as a way to mourn his passing.

The idea of the king and his subjects working hard for the collective prosperity of the nation, which emerged out of these specific historical circumstances to meet a specific economic goal, had lasting effects. In the decades since, up through today, Bhumibol's development-oriented activities became a central feature of state and palace public relations, and the themes surrounding this campaign a core part of the national ideology built around the kingship. Photographs from this period of the king meeting his rural subjects face to

face, surveying his land, map and camera in hand comprise the core images of its iconography⁷. As then, Bhumibol is presented as a benevolent national father, and the Thai people, his children. His work is described as selfless giving and sacrifice in a Buddhist idiom.

⁷ See Peleggi (2002, 2013) and Stengs (2009).

1. Sharing the Unspeakable

This chapter began with the investigation into an apparent paradox that I seemed to be alone in seeing. During the lifetime of Thailand's King Bhumibol Adulyadej, speaking even indirectly of his death was proscribed by strict social convention undergirded by harsh *lèse-majesté* laws. This greatly limited both how the press was able to report on the King's health in his final days, and how people were able to share, discuss and make sense of information reported. Nonetheless, when the official announcement of his death was made by a palace newscaster, broadcast to every station nationwide, it seemed nearly the entire nation was aware of and, in one way or another, responding to the event. Whether gathered around their television sets, feverishly scrolling through social media, or locking themselves away from the outside world, everyone, it seemed, was waiting to hear (or deliberately shutting out) confirmation of what they already knew. How, with no discussion of the King's medical condition, in spite of government insistence that there was nothing to worry about, with no mention of preparations for a possible succession or even of the word death itself, did everyone seem to know what was coming? How was foreknowledge of this unspeakable, yet ultimately inevitable event so widespread?

To find an answer, I dug through media reports, social media feeds and chat logs — both my own and those of a few interlocutors who granted me temporary access — and, over the coming year and beyond, interviewed people about their experience of the King's death, the days leading up to it, and the mourning period that followed. My pursuit of this simple, material question about the circulation and interpretation of forbidden but critical knowledge led me to the observations and questions that are the basis of this chapter.

In the King's final days, wildly circulating rumors about his declining health created

an immediate need for the possibility of his death to be addressed. Seen as the sole stabilizing figure in an otherwise divided country, the continuation or cessation of his living body was seen to have immediate consequences for the nation. This need, however, was in direct conflict with strict, deeply embodied taboos on speaking of the King's death in even indirect ways, in both private and public spheres. After the announcement of his passing on the evening of October 13th, when the theretofore unspeakable was made reality, there was pervasive uncertainty as to when, where, with whom, and how the King's death could be discussed, while at the same time the desire to grieve and the necessity to mourn presented immediate, pressing questions about how to do so. The King's death that is, may have made the unspeakable speakable, but no one knew what to say or how, even as the need was felt to be most acute.

The King's potential, and ultimately actual, death created unprecedented circumstances that disrupted long-established codes governing speech and conduct pertaining to the monarchy. In spite of this, the unspeakability of the king's death persisted. In different ways before and after his death, new norms quickly emerged through widely felt social demands to constrain expressions of fear, anxiety and grief in public space to a limited, acceptable range, even as the desire for public expression of and engagement with such feelings was widespread. In the King's final days this took the form of expectations to carry on life as normal and maintain a public silence around his declining health. Within hours of the announcement of his passing, an ethic of stoically carrying on in spite of one's grief came to dominate conceptions of proper mourning in public space. That is, in both periods — before and after — discussion of the King's death — potential or actual — and expression of related feelings was widely discouraged.

Against this backdrop people turned increasingly towards virtual modes of communication — most commonly, social networking sites and mobile chat apps like Facebook and Line — to engage with unfolding events in ways they felt unable to do in public. Yet while the presumed privacy of mobile chat apps allowed a greater degree of expressive freedom, the strong demands for the performance of normalcy (before the king's death) and the performance of stoicism (after) present in public, real space was mirrored in public virtual spaces like Facebook, where discussion of the King's health and grief over his passing were conspicuously absent. Meanwhile, however, visual forms of well-wishing and commemoration proliferated, most notably the posting of King-related memes and adaptation of one's virtual presence to a mourning aesthetic.

In this section I examine these King-related visual practices that emerged in virtual space over a period from October 9, a few days before the king's death, to October 16, a few days after. Tracking these forms of well-wishing and commemoration across emerging norms and public expectations regarding speech and behavior about the King over this same period, I argue the visual element of these practices provided a form of abstraction that bypassed the direct linguistic register of taboo and allowed for public expression and engagement with fears, concerns, and grief about the King's possible and ultimately actual death.

1.1 Taboo and the Unspeakable

The widely felt social demands for the performance of normalcy and the maintenance of silence on the subject of the King's health is not without precedent. In Thailand a great degree of emphasis is placed on the construction and maintenance of an ordered and serene public atmosphere. This concern for public image is part of a wider

moral economy in which behaviors and speech are appraised differently in private and public spheres. Contrary to a Western moral logic that tends to operate according to a universal code wherein individual behaviors and actions are thought to be abstractly moral or immoral, right or wrong, conduct is appraised (whether one's own or others) in highly context-dependent ways. Part of this is placing great emphasis on the maintenance of and image of orderly calm (*kwam-sangop-riap-roi*) in public spaces. Writing of this in regards to the sexual domain, Rosalind Morris notes that Thai moral logics operate on a crux of “visibility/invisibility” (Morris 1994) that often allows for greater freedom in private than Western moral logics that “assume or demand a relationship of transparency between inner truth and outward appearance” (Morris 2000). Morris:

... virtually any [sexual] act is acceptable if it neither injures another person nor offends others through inappropriate self-disclosure. As one of the country's more prominent *kathoey*s [male-to-female transgenders] remarked about being gay in Thailand, “there is no problem... providing you don't ripple the surface calm”. (1994, 32)

From a Western perspective this often appears contradictory, or a hypocritical obsession with public image but in fact operates according to an internally consistent cultural logic characterized by, “concern with policing the context, whether public or private, in which an action takes place or a statement is made rather than with enforcing universal norms of acceptable behavior and speech.” (Jackson 2004).

Indeed, this bears out when one considers the forms of social policing applied to speech about the royal family. Criticizing or speaking disrespectfully of any member of the royal family in the public sphere is absolutely “taboo” and would likely result in extraordinary shock and disapproval. Privately, however, gossip, including often irreverent commentary, is not uncommon. Under this system, the content of deeds and statements is

often secondary to the context in which they are performed or made, to the extent that with a particularly sensitive topic — like the monarchy — the truth or falsehood of a specific speech act is irrelevant. As Jackson notes, “the ‘demonstrable truth’ of [speech about the Monarchy] is irrelevant to the operation of Thai lese-majesty laws, which punish all representations that Thai authorities perceive as placing the monarchy in anything but a positive light” (2004).

However, I would suggest that taboos on speech about the King specifically operate additionally at a deeper level. With regards to the King himself critical speech would be met with extraordinary shock whether in private or public (though likely more so in public), suggesting this social prohibition operates according to a different principal. Importantly, references to the King’s death operate similarly to criticism, but even more deeply. The same was true with speech about his death (during his lifetime), in my sense was an even stricter taboo than the one on general disrespectful speech. That is, while context is important in speech taboos pertaining to the King, the content is equally, if not more important, suggesting that taboos on speaking of the King’s death operate at a much deeper, more embodied level.

A sense of just how sensitive the king’s death was can be found in a news item that appeared on the website of the Bangkok Post that on the afternoon of October 12. The article, albeit unintentionally, manages to convey both the sensitivity of speaking of the king’s death — particularly for the media — and the frenzied urgency that belied the calm public exterior in the final days leading up to it. Because it is brief, I’ll reproduce it here in full. Under the headline, “Fake Internet Photo Libels Bangkok Post,” the article states:

A malicious internet post defaming the high institution and

attempting to libel the Bangkok Post appeared Wednesday on the internet. A Twitter user posted a fake "screen capture" alleging to be news originating from the Bangkok Post. Even a cursory examination would reveal to any reader that the posting is fake, and does not resemble in any manner the style of "Most Recent" news on the Bangkok Post website. The Bangkok Post reported the image to Thung Mahamek district police as soon as it came to the newspaper's attention. The newspaper filed an official complaint. Bangkok Post management and staff will cooperate fully with all authorities in attempting to identify all those persons behind this malicious internet post and in helping to bring the criminal or criminals to justice.

Notably, the article gave no indication of the content of the falsely attributed screen capture. Given the context, one can only assume it was something related to the king's state of health (which, legally speaking, would constitute defamation). Also notable, however, is that the Bangkok Post felt the need to publish this article on the afternoon of the day the screenshot surfaced, especially when "even a cursory examination" would let anyone know it's fake.

1.2 News Media Before the King's Death

The first indication that the King's health was potentially in serious decline came via an official statement detailing a series of medical treatments he had undergone, released by the Bureau of the Royal Household, the public relations arm of the palace, posted to their website, unusually late in the evening on October 9⁸. While palace reports on the King's health are not uncommon, this stood out in two important ways. First, updates on the King's health are typically provided when he's shown signs of improvement or recovery. This announcement, however, was released before the treatments detailed had shown signs of efficacy, and while his condition was still unstable, signaling the current situation was unusual.

⁸ See *Talangan Samnakprarachawang* 37

Second, news media reported the Bureau of the Royal Household's statement on television the next day not on the nightly News of the Palace broadcasts, but by anchors on morning news programs, repeated throughout the day. In Thailand all television and radio stations are required to broadcast a nightly news segment covering the activities of royal family members. While individual to each station, these reports are strictly controlled and produced in close coordination with the Bureau of the Royal Household — the public relations arm of the palace — who provide the stories that will be covered and supply or approve scripts and footage. They are typically filmed in advance and broadcast between 7:00 and 8:30 PM. It's not uncommon for any news program — not only News of the Palace segments — to make mention of royal family members or their charitable works in passing. Because of the sensitivity surrounding the monarchy, however, most important news pertaining directly to royal persons is confined to these nightly broadcasts and delivered by anchors and reporters specially trained in the use of *ratchasap*, a special lexicon of Thai language used when discussing the royal family in formal situations. Thus, the delivery of the news about the king's health by regular anchors on morning news programs, combined with the unusual timing of the palace bulletin served to signal the severity of the King's condition to the Thai public. Importantly, all media outlets refrained from any additional reporting on the situation or from interpreting or speculating on the contents of the official announcement. Absent, for example, were the kind of interviews with experts that one might expect in a story of this magnitude happening elsewhere: connected persons who might provide additional information or commentary from medical professionals who could interpret and provide context on known details about the king's health. On the contrary, anchors merely read the palace statement verbatim, with unchanged affect, and

moved on to the other news of the day.

In this way, the timing and form of the news delivery, rather than its contents, served as an early sign that something was amiss. Over the four days to follow, this announcement would serve as an unspoken context through which the public interpreted and made sense of subsequent news stories, apparently unrelated at their surface to the King's health. That is, while it was forbidden for news media to interpret the palace announcement or speculate about the King's prospects for recovery, they could report on other relevant events, so long as the possibility of the king's death was not mentioned explicitly. On October 10 and 11 this primarily meant coverage of the crowds of well-wishers gathering in vigil at Siriraj Hospital, where the King was being treated. On October 12 and 13, implicitly related news coverage expanded to include reporting throughout the day on the movements of important government officials and royal family members - in particular, on sudden changes to the junta leader Prayuth Chan-Ocha's schedule and the Crown Prince and Princesses' arrival at Siriraj - and the mass deployment of soldiers around Bangkok, ostensibly on account of terrorist bomb threats.

1.3 Before the Announcement

In the days leading up to the announcement of the King's passing, as anxieties over his condition increased, the unspeakable nature of his death and deep concerns about its consequences fueled stringent social pressure to maintain a public silence about the King's uncertain condition and carry on daily life as usual. Within this tense atmosphere, open discussion the King's health was highly frowned upon in public spaces or with people outside one's trusted circles. These emergent norms adhered not only in the broader public sphere, but in public spaces of known community (e.g., workplaces, school, etc.). In the first

few days following the palace announcement about treatment of the King's condition on October 9 — the announcement which signaled something was amiss — most interlocutors reported only a vague sense of concern and, thus, found it easy to conform to the expected performance of normalcy. By October 12, however, as news media began reporting on the movements of royal family members and high-ranking politicians, interlocutors reported a growing disparity between a by-then pervasive and acute sense of anxiety and fear and the growing demand for the performance of normalcy. Even as people widely shared and discussed rumors and news items with close friends through private channels, many interlocutors found it increasingly difficult to maintain a public sense of normalcy, though all expressed feeling the necessity to do so. There wasn't a complete silence in these spaces, however. Most reported passing on or receiving news items with coworkers/colleagues, but only those with whom they were close, not with the wider workplace environment.

“We only talked about it with our close friends, quietly. And of course, everyone was on Line [the chat app] all day. Yeah, maybe one or two people, but not a big group, not with everyone.” An informant who works in a large office told me when I asked him whether his coworkers were talking about the King's health. “Even though we were all doing it,” he added, “Everyone was sharing some updates with each other - sometimes sending a message to someone at the next desk. Is it strange? I don't think so. You only want to talk about it with your friends. No. I mean you should only talk about it with your friends.”

While informants had a range of reactions to and feelings about public expectations in this period, all seem to point towards a mutually understood need to maintain a calm and harmonious public atmosphere. As one interlocutor said in an interview, “You can't start getting all worked up. I mean, he might still get better, right? And how are people gonna

react if everyone starts cancelling everything? It would make everyone freak out.” This interlocutor’s sense that public expressions of anxiety over the King’s condition would be upsetting to others bears out in how others reported feeling during this period. Another informant, for example, made the conscious decision to disengage from social media and avoid the news during the final two days before the King’s death, citing feelings of exhaustion and helplessness. “I already knew it might happen, of course I was worried. But I didn’t want to hear every rumor and every little story about it. Why? What’s the point? There’s nothing we can do. So I deleted Facebook and didn’t look at the news, and just kept going like normal.” Similarly, another informant who tried to disengage from news and social media when things started getting tense told me of a colleague in their office they described as a “gossipy old auntie who always wants attention” announcing in audible voice directed at no one, but for everyone around to hear, that the Crown Prince was back in the country and on his way to Siriraj hospital. The informant was furious at the coworker for doing this, in spite of having already heard this news from a friend an hour earlier.

In the four days leading up to the announcement of the King’s death, people’s behavior on social media in many ways mirrored the tenuous caution regarding speech about his health that dominated in public real space.⁹ Outside of well-wishing memes, most Facebook activity over this period was unrelated to the King - photos of meals, links to funny video clips, witty or mundane status updates, daily life online - even over the final two days of intense national anxiety. Conspicuously absent was any mention whatsoever of news related to the King’s health, including the official palace announcement about his condition

⁹ Following Danah Boyd’s concept of “networked publics”, I treat virtual space, especially social networking sites tied to people’s identities like Facebook, as a form of public space, and online practices as a form of public speech.

on October 10, and the movements of royal family members and government officials that fueled anxieties and speculation on the 12th and 13th. Unlike illicit rumors about possible, impending government announcements that circulated widely on more private channels, these stories were not publicly unspeakable in any official or legal sense. They were widely reported in the news media, yet made no appearance in people's Facebook activity, either through reference to their contents or links to the stories themselves, even as many were following them with rapt attention and sharing them with friends and family across more private channels. These practices suggest a "textual silence" on matters related to the King's health akin the verbal silence that dominated public space, and an extension of the widely followed imperative for the performance of normalcy from real to virtual space.

Parallel to this textual silence, however, visual forms of expression proliferated. Beginning late in the evening on October 11th people began posting memes about the King, either as updates in their feeds or, in some cases, to their profile pictures. This practice continued the next day, and became common by the afternoon of October 12, reaching a peak by early evening on October 13th¹⁰, a few hours before the announcement of his death.¹¹ Memes were stylized in yellow and pink, the King's two colors. Typical motifs included the Thai numeral nine, the king's portrait, and/or the words "long live the king" in

¹⁰ By this time a little over half of the people in my data set had posted memes and/or changed their profile pictures.

¹¹ Notably the Facebook newsfeed algorithm highly prioritizes profile picture changes over other kinds of posts, meaning that if one changes their Facebook profile picture it is more likely to appear in their friends' newsfeeds than if one posts an image or a status update. In this way, the common practice of changing one's profile picture to a pink or yellow king meme acted in tandem with the algorithm to the effect of "over representing" such memes in the last couple days leading up to the King's death. That is, while everyday posts completely unrelated to the King's health were still quite common up until the evening of the announcement, as the practice of changing one's profile picture to a king meme became more and more common, the Facebook algorithm concentrated such activity into users' newsfeeds. Many informants pointed to seeing a "stream" or "flood" of pink and yellow memes as a moment that stood out in their memories, either alerting them to the severity of the situation or increasing their sense of its gravity.

Thai or English. Memes were usually posted without caption, although the words “long live the king” and/or the prayer-hands emoji¹² were not uncommon. The most popular meme was a square, pink image with a small yellow heart in the center, customized to include the name of the person posting it with the words “[NAME] loves the King” - using the King’s popular, intimate appellation, *nai luang* - in a popular, handwriting-styled font in white, and “long live the king” (*song pra-jaroen*) at the bottom. It was common for this meme to be posted as one’s profile picture or cover image.

Two important elements of these memes are noteworthy. First none of them made reference, textual or visual, to the specific situation currently unfolding, either the King’s health or any related news items circulating simultaneous to their growing popularity. While I believe all the memes I came across to have been newly created for this occasion, they just as easily could have been posted on Coronation Day or the King’s birthday¹³. Even the Thai phrase translated as “long live the King” (*song pra-jaroen*), makes no mention of life or longevity - a more direct translation would be something like, “may the reign be prosperous”. Just as direct reference to these matters was avoided in verbal speech in public real space and textual speech in public virtual space, so it was in (visual) well-wishing memes during the King’s final decline. In this way, these memes can be seen as conforming, even visually, to the maintenance of public silence around the King’s condition. Reference to the situation at hand was indirect and only implied by wider unspoken but commonly understood context.

¹² In Thailand the prayer hands emoji is interpreted as a *wai* gesture, used both for greeting and for displaying gratitude or respect. The gesture is also used to show respect in the act of praying (whether to Buddha, a god, or a spirit), and thus can be interpreted here as either signaling prayer or respect for the King.

¹³ King-related memes are sometimes posted on royal special occasions, though not nearly to the extent that they were in this period.

Second, the King's name or mention of the King as a specific figure, tended to only appear within the visual elements of memes. As previously mentioned, captions were uncommon and when they were included, they rarely made direct mention of the King (again, *song pra-jaroen*, a common caption, is more accurately translated as, "may the reign be prosperous" and doesn't directly mention the King).

I suggest that the increasing proliferation of these memes, which ran parallel to widespread, increasing anxieties over the King's health, signal a strong desire to publicly address the possibility of the King's death. This idea is supported by the high interaction rate¹⁴ that King related meme activity had compared to other (non-King related) posts. Notably, these interactions had a heavy "like" to "comment" ratio - meaning people responded to king memes a lot, but for the most part silently, by clicking like rather than commenting. This conforms to the general textual silence surrounding the King's health and suggests that such silence, including the avoidance of using his name or referring to him specifically, is rooted not only in deference to public expectations for the performance of normalcy, but also uncertainty and confusion about how to speak of the King in this unprecedented situation. Second, in this context I suggest that the visual mode of communication allows for a level of abstraction that bypasses the direct linguistic register of taboo making the unspeakable expressible.

1.4 After the Announcement

Immediately following the King's death, expressions of grief, often intense and effusive were common. Quickly thereafter, starting within an hour and well established by

¹⁴ Interaction rate is a measure of how much other users engage with a social media post. In the case of Facebook, through comments, likes, and shares.

the following morning, an approach of stoic perseverance quickly came to dominate public conceptions of how to properly mourn. To soldier on in spite of one's grief, to devote oneself to diligent work and the execution of one's duties in all spheres of life was seen as the best way to honor and mourn the King. In such a climate, public expressions of grief or anxiety about what the King's death meant for the nation's future was widely understood to be disruptive to the maintenance of proper, public calm, and counterproductive to the national mourning process.

That effusive displays of grief were discouraged in public spaces should not, however, be taken to mean that there was a general silence around the King's death or that it wasn't addressed through other means. On the evening of the announcement and the week that followed, when feelings were at their most raw, people tended to put forth a great effort to extend small forms of care for one another, even while the subject of grief or the King's death may go unmentioned. At the same time, the King's death was a frequent topic of conversation, just not in terms of grief. The gravity of the event and the scale of mourning expected meant major adjustments to the conduct of people's daily lives. To most people's great surprise, the government did not announce a bank holiday and in workplaces throughout the country people frequently spent the following days figuring out and implementing accommodations that would need to be made for the mourning period. The King's death (and proper responses to it) was the dominant focus of public concern and attention, just not the grief and fears his death caused.

Just as in the run up to the King's death, people's behavior in public, virtual spaces like Facebook in many ways mirrored those in public real spaces. After the announcement, the textual silence surrounding his condition was broken, as people began to post textual

status updates. Typically these were either a) expressions of pride in the King and/or being Thai, b) expressions of gratitude to the King for his years of dedication to the Thai people, or, c) expressions of grief and/or expressions of difficulty dealing with grief. Notably, expressions of grief, just as the well-wishing posts prior, tended to avoid mentioning the King by name or making specific reference to his death. One informant, for example, posted “I knew today would come. I thought I could stand it, but I’m crying. I have goosebumps. The world is collapsing.” Another meanwhile posted, “I finally understand, father is a grandfather already, and he is very old.” and yet another “I can’t take it anymore, I thought I could hold myself together, but I can’t. Ahhhh! Everyone on the Skytrain is crying! This is too sad, too much...” Expressions of pride and gratitude, meanwhile, did mention the King by name, though almost entirely with longer and more formal appellations than people typically use. Throughout all posts, no one used any words related to death or made mention of the event or the announcement of the King’s passing. Within an hour, posts expressing grief ceased, a period closely corresponding to the emergence of the ethic of mourning that valued stoic perseverance in real public space.

I suggest that these practices around naming the King reflect an uncertainty with how to discuss his death, one that stems from longstanding, deeply embodied taboos. Where raw expressions of grief were concerned, the most direct reference to his passing, mention of the King was typically avoided. In expressions of pride and gratitude, the use of atypically formal language can be seen as form of abstraction, distancing people from the, emotive connotations of the intimate, commonly used name *nai luang*. Notably, while expressions of grief stopped soon after the announcement, expressions of pride and gratitude continued and proliferated that evening and in the days to follow. Beginning the following day,

however, textual posts about the King increasingly used the intimate *nai luang*, rather than the more formal names used the night of his death. Here, I suggest that the return to intimate naming forms reflect a desire to express, process or publicly engage with grief in ways that were no longer publicly acceptable. This invocation of intimacy is borne out in visual practices that emerged over this same period.

The most common visual practices in the week following the King's death included adapting one's online profiles to match a monochromatic mourning aesthetic that drew heavily on the aesthetic forms seen in the official government announcement. These included completely blacking out one's profile picture and cover image or changing existing images to black and white. People also commonly updated profile and cover images to be stylized Thai numeral nines, or stylized and sometimes highly abstracted images of the King, often iconographic line drawings based on famous photographs. Similar images were also posted and shared as memes. Many of the images used for profile and cover pictures bore elements drawing a personal connection between the King and the person posting them. In some cases, people created their own stylized numeral nines or images of the King by applying filters in editing software or mobile apps. Others included reference to some part of the King's life with which they felt personal connection. One informant, for example, a photographer, made a hand-drawn portrait of the King with a camera around his neck, a visual motif common in royal iconography, but which, in this case, personally connects the poster to the King via a shared pastime¹⁵.

¹⁵ This is not without precedent. The King was often portrayed as a brilliant and multi-talented renaissance man. During his lifetime people, it was common for people to find personal connection to him through one of his many touted skills. For example, it was common for photographers to put portraits of the king with a camera around his neck in their studios, architects and engineers to put portraits of the king surveying a landscape in their offices, fisherman to put photos of him on a sailboat in their own boats, etc.

Other visual practices that emerged and became increasingly common in the days to follow included posting and sharing archival photographs of the King throughout his reign, often pictures from his youth which were publicly accessible but not widely circulated in the latter decades of his life. At the same time, media industry around the country began quickly producing news articles, blog posts, and videos about the King's life as well as guides to various mourning ceremonies and to daily conduct in the mourning period. As this media content was produced, posting and sharing it on social media became increasingly common. As with the profile images above, many of the archival photographs, historical media content, and guides to the mourning period that people posted and shared included some element connecting the life of the person posting to the life of the King. One interlocutor, for example, who works as a musician and DJ, posted numerous articles about the King's musical achievements and photographs of the King performing or composing music. Another interlocutor who works in the fashion industry posted guides for how to dress during the mourning period, and, later, articles with tips on how to dress fashionably while conforming to mourning-appropriate expectations. As with the return to the intimate name *nai luang* described above, I suggest that the visual elements of personal connection present in profile image and media posting practices reflect a desire to express, process or publicly engage with grief in ways that were no longer publicly acceptable.

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