

## **Cambodia is not a province of Thailand: the Modern Myth of Suvannabhūmi**

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§1.

“Suvannabhūmi” (សុវណ្ណភូមិ) is not just the name of an airport: it has been an important part of Thai propaganda for over 100 years. Today, the myth of “Suvannabhūmi” is used to propound the claim that all of Cambodia, Laos and even Vietnam were formerly part of Thailand, but were later “lost” in a series of wars (with the details normally left up to the imagination).

This article traces the myth of Suvannabhūmi from its origins through several stages of transformation, down to its recent re-packaging by the Taksin-era Thai government, and its peculiar role in the still-ongoing border dispute between Thailand and Cambodia.

§2.

What is the origin of the “Suvannabhūmi” myth? In 1837, James Prinsep translated the stone inscriptions of the Indian Emperor Ashoka. 1837 may seem like a long time ago, but this is merely modern history: before the mid-19th century, nobody in Thailand was interested in the meaning of the word “Suvannabhūmi” and almost nobody knew the name of the emperor Ashoka.

After James Prinsep translated the inscriptions of Ashoka into English, people in Southeast Asia became very excited about the earliest origins of Buddhism (and began re-writing history). In Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia, new myths were written, trying to prove that this ancient emperor in India sent “Buddhist Missionaries” to their own countries.

The Burmese tried to construe the discovery as if it showed that Burmese Buddhism came directly from India (during the life of Ashoka) and, at the same time, in Thailand people tried to interpret the same short passages of text in another way to prove that Buddhism came to Thailand first (not via Burma).

Some of this was “nationalist propaganda”, but some of it was just silly enthusiasm. European scholars had discovered and published exciting “news” about the ancient world, and it changed the way people thought about the history of Buddhism. In the century that followed, it changed the way people thought about nationalism in Southeast Asia, too. Still today, most people in Thailand have a vague sense that “Ashoka” was an important King, who somehow “gave” Buddhism to Thailand.

The word “Suvannabhūmi” does not appear on the Delhi pillar that Prinsep translated, nor on any of the other major inscriptions (or “edicts”) of Ashoka; however, there is a badly damaged inscription of the same period with the word Suvannabhūmi on it (and almost none of the other words are legible on that stone).

§3.

The simple fact that gets overlooked in the propaganda is that Ashoka lived around the year 260 B.C. –i.e., more than 2,200 years ago. This is more than 1000 years before the oldest Pali and Sanskrit inscriptions that have ever been found in Cambodia, i.e., many centuries before the first archaeological evidence of the arrival of Buddhism in mainland Southeast Asia. At that time, there were no Thai people in “Thailand” and Angkor Wat did not exist in Cambodia (meanwhile, Burma was still in the very early stages of the Pyu migration and settlement, commencing circa 500 B.C., with many migrations and cultural changes coming thereafter before the inhabitants began to resemble what we now call Burmese).

Most people have difficulty visualizing periods of time beyond a thousand years, however, this is a fundamental fact that renders most of the propaganda a moot point: even if it were true that Ashoka had sent missionaries to what is now Burma and Thailand, who would have welcomed them “here” in the 3rd century B.C.?

The inscriptions of Ashoka themselves do not leave any doubt about the matter in the minds of scholars (i.e., *no*, Ashoka *did not* have diplomatic relations with the area that is now Thailand) but the mythology loosely inspired by the inscriptions is a mass-media phenomenon, and now a part of mainstream cultural “lore”, whereas very few people have an interest in the primary sources. Most of the difficult work in transcribing and translating the edicts of Ashoka had already been finished about a hundred years ago (e.g., Alfred C. Woolner, 1924, *Asoka: Text and Glossary*, now available as a cheap reprint from India) –this is no longer an area of philological debate.

§4.

By the same token, the popularity of the myth has very little to do with the study of stone inscriptions: as the story is told in Thailand (e.g., in its official presentation at the NDMI, a national museum discussed in §10, below) there’s normally a rapid segue from the mention of Ashoka’s name to the story of two monks named Soṇa and Uttara, who allegedly traveled from India to Thailand.

The Thai sources variously insinuate or directly claim that the journey of Soṇa and Uttara (from India to Thailand) is recorded in the edicts of Ashoka –but, as anyone who has read the inscriptions knows, this is completely false, so the segue between these two stories is often written in the vaguest terms possible.

The propaganda relies on the assumption that this story (that almost nobody reads for themselves, as it is written in Pali) records a series of historical and political facts from the same period of ancient history. The author of the story and its literary source is almost never mentioned, or else it is vaguely suggested that it originates from Ashoka’s edicts, as aforementioned.

The story of Soṇa and Uttara is a fable from medieval Sri Lanka. It does not say anything about Thailand, and it does not name a single (historical) Thai king; it does not describe any historical event that ever transpired in Thailand; it is not even a story about two Indian monks going to Thailand (much less an historical account thereof).

The story is about two monks who go to a magical kingdom where a monster (nāga, នាគ) is eating all of the king’s sons. The monks have an adventure trying to defeat this monster. In the end, they magically protect the kingdom by chanting in Pali. This impresses the local people, who then convert to Buddhism. To thank the two monks, the Royal family decides to name the new prince “Soṇuttara”, combining the names of the two monks; in fact, out of gratitude, they vow to name all of their kings “Soṇuttara” in the future. This is possibly a joke that doesn’t translate very well: Soṇa (សោណ) means “Dog” in Pali, and Uttara (อุทฺท) means “ultimate”.

There is no reason for anyone to think that the “golden land” mentioned as the setting for this fable is Thailand. Everything about the story seems to implicitly describe a place in ancient India; even so, it is a fictional setting of no specific importance. It is possible that no location in the real world was alluded to. There is no reason why anyone would think this story contains historical facts of political importance.

Is anyone in Thailand or Cambodia today really aware of how silly this story is? It was published in English for the first time over 100 years ago, i.e., in Wilhelm Geiger’s 1908 translation of the *Mahāvamsa*. The Thai propaganda about Soṇa and Uttara was probably based on that English-language source. This is a common pattern: it is easier to read English translations than to study the original Pali. A lot of the pseudo-history of Thailand was inspired by European research that was new at the time. Obviously, for anyone who is directly aware of how silly the original story is, it must seem even sillier to build a political ideology on this basis.

Some scholars have debated the location of the toponym mentioned in this story; however, for our practical interest here, it doesn't matter where it was at all. The "golden land" mentioned in this fable is completely irrelevant to the history of Thailand (and Southeast Asia generally). The story itself was totally unknown in Thailand until modern governments started making propaganda out of it.

## §5.

How, then, did an obscure stone inscription and an unknown fable from medieval Sri Lanka come to inspire the name of one of the world's busiest airports? The propaganda about "Suvannabhūmi" became increasingly important in the series of wars that dominated the 20th century.

Prince Damrong wrote the history of Thailand as an explicitly nationalistic (and racialistic) project, creating the myth that Thai people originated in Mongolia and that they migrated via a kingdom in Yunnan. The myth presumes that the Thais were the rulers and inhabitants of the "Nan-Chao" kingdom (i.e., 南诏 = Nanzhao); this was a real kingdom in Yunnan, but the idea that it was populated by Thai people is fiction, that has never had any evidence to support it. It is almost needless to say that there has never been any evidence that Mongolia was inhabited by Thais –in fact, it is fair to say that all evidence (linguistic and archaeological) indicates the contrary.

Prince Damrong invented this theory, specifying that the Thai people were driven out of Yunnan in the year 143 B.C.; this pseudo-historical date was apparently dreamed up without any evidence whatsoever (i.e., there is not now and never has been a shred of archaeological evidence to support this).

Inconveniently, I would note, this still isn't early enough for the Thai people to migrate down to the coast and greet the supposed missionaries sent by the Emperor Ashoka. This is an obvious anachronism that is too often overlooked: even if we could accept Damrong's version of history, it would be impossible for the Thais to have received Buddhism during the reign of Ashoka in India.

This is not news, but it remains generally unknown, whereas the myth of Suvannabhūmi is ubiquitous. Many Thai authors have already written critiques of Prince Damrong's history, including Nidhi Eoseewong (who is probably the most famous and respected Thai historian of the last 50 years). For a good article on the history of writing history in Thailand, see: Charmavit Kasetsiri, 1979, "Thai Historiography from Ancient Times to the Modern Period", in: *Perceptions of the Past in South East Asia*, the Asian Studies Association of Australia. More recently, Suriya Ratanakul (of Mahidol University, Thailand) has published critiques of Thai origin theories from a linguistic perspective. Many Thai scholars have contributed reasonable perspectives on these historical issues to the International Conference of Thai Studies; however, these critiques are generally shared amongst scholars and specialists –they do not become propaganda, nor can they have much influence with the masses.

## §6.

Damrong's "Suvannabhūmi" theory began with the idea that Thai people left China (moving from North to South) and conquered a large part of Southeast Asia. The political advantage of Damrong's version of history was that it justified Thailand starting a war to conquer Shan State (ruled by Burma), and, possibly, the (re-)conquest of their (fictional) homeland in Yunnan, further north. Damrong's most famous book on history is simply titled "Thai Fight Burma", first published in 1917. Most of his theories are anti-Burmese and anti-Chinese, with no interest in Cambodia whatsoever (indeed, Cambodia is hardly ever mentioned).

In 1931, Luang Wichitwathakan published his version of Thai history. He later became the head of the "Department of Fine Arts", where his efforts were not limited to writing books. He produced dramas performed on stage and songs broadcast on radio. He was a major influence in Thai popular culture, as well as in the "high culture" of written history. There was a transition in the 1930s from Prince Damrong's version of history to Luang Wichitwathakan's version. Although Damrong's books continued to be used in classrooms, the author felt that he was marginalized in (and excluded from) Thai political discourse after

1932; simply, his works did not feature the new ideas that were increasingly dominant in Thai propaganda in this era (such as “Communism”, “Democracy”, etc.).

In general, no effort was made to create a coherent account of what Cambodia was, nor of who the Khmers are, nor of why cities like Lopburi (right in the center of modern Thailand) are so obviously of ancient Khmer origin. In this era, the contradistinction between Thai and Khmer was neither the primary interest of nationalist history, nor of racial discourse in Thailand; instead, we have a clear construction of Burma and China as rival civilizations, but tremendous ambiguity as to the role of the Lao and Khmer in the narrative. Vague claims that the Lao, Thai and Khmer were all originally one people are often enough found within a few paragraphs of equally vague claims that the Thai were superior to the other two, and had conquered them in a (Damrong-esque) great migration.

§7.

Thai History was written and re-written rapidly in the years leading up to World War Two. When the Thais (very briefly) occupied Shan State (in collusion with the Japanese) they published maps and propaganda declaring it “the original Thai homeland”. They published a new wave of Suvannabhūmi propaganda after their victory in the Franco-Thai war of 1941. There was a rush to produce propaganda fast enough to justify Thailand’s territorial claims from 1941 to 1947, as the Thais believed that they had an opportunity to conquer all of “French Indochina” at the end of World War Two.

However, in 1947 everything changed: the British signed a new treaty with Burma (the “Atlee Treaty”) ending Thai hopes of ruling Shan State, and the French recognized a new constitution for Laos as a separate nation. In the same year, Thailand had yet another *coup d’état* and began negotiations with the U.N. “Franco-Siamese Conciliation Commission”.

These negotiations in 1947 are much more important than the maps that have dominated the discussion of the dotted-line around Preah Vihear. In 1947, the Thai government told this special “Commission” at the U.N. that Thailand had always been the historical ruler of all of Laos, and at least ruled Battambang, if not all of Cambodia. The Thai argument was that France had somehow tricked the world into thinking Laos and Cambodia were separate countries, when they were really provinces of Thailand; therefore, the provinces should be returned to Thailand as the French were leaving. Of course, that is also a myth: it is the myth of “Suvannabhūmi”, already explained.

The U.N. was thus expected, “...to decide on the claims... which would expand the territory of Thailand all the way to the Vietnamese border... [and] the Commission rejected in its final report all of Thailand’s claims.” (Pheupanh Ngaosyvathn, 1985, *Asian Survey*, vol. 25, issue 12, p. 1242-1259).

§8.

The UNESCO paperwork concerning the fate of this single temple (Preah Vihear) omits the real drama of history that created the border.

The French won a war against Thailand in 1893. Negotiations then began between France and England (from 1893-6) to decide Thailand and Cambodia’s borders. At that time, the British and French were very concerned with the control of Shan State and Yunnan –and neither the Thai nor the Cambodians had a voice in the negotiations that resulted in the Anglo-French settlement of 1896.

Today, it is difficult to imagine that landlocked Shan State and the nearly-impassable mountains that separate it from Yunnan were ever of such geo-political importance; however, starting in the 1870s, both the British and the French wanted to build railroads to Yunnan through this supposedly-strategic tract of land (I discussed the politics of European railroads and the opium trade at some length in my *Historical Introduction to Laos in 1893*, published by White Lotus Press a few years ago). Prince Damrong’s propaganda reflects the political concerns of that era, looking north from Bangkok, seeking to control Shan

state and expand into China at a time when many feared the French and English would go to war to control trade (specifically, the opium trade) in the region.

§9.

The link between this strange history, the stranger myth of “Suvannabhūmi”, and the still-ongoing border dispute between Thailand and Cambodia may be summed up as follows.

The Thai army did defeat the French army in 1941, prior to the Japanese occupation. Cambodians are more likely to remember their own rebellion against the French in 1942; both events (1941 & 1942) demonstrated the weakness of the French military in Southeast Asia. Soon thereafter, the French were defeated by the Germans in Europe and defeated by the Japanese in Asia. After the Japanese retreat, the French were defeated by the Communists (within the former French colonies) when they tried to re-assert control. That can be counted as at least three important military defeats in a span of about 13 years (1941–54).

These simple facts tend to be omitted from European articles on this history (or on the current border dispute) –either because they are embarrassing, or because their salience is unclear to the authors. Their importance is tremendous, because the U.N. decision of 1947 was made in precisely this context.

In contrast to 1947, the history of the other agreements (and maps) is relatively trivial: the 1896 agreements (between the French and Thais) were superseded in 1902, and all of the agreements of 1902 were thrown aside in 1941.

In general, there was little-or-no representation for Cambodia at any of these negotiations; France did not even allow Cambodian representation at the armistice of 1954. This means that there was nobody at any of these meetings who could ask the obvious question of why Surin was assumed to be part of Thailand in the first place. The negotiations were defined by the threat posed by imperialist armies from Europe. When that threat disappeared, the logic behind the borders they had imposed disappeared, too.

The collapse of the French empire left Cambodia and Laos with irrational borders; it also left Thailand with an identity crisis. The Thai are now struggling to reconcile the notion of their own “Thainess” with the legacy of more ancient civilizations that now surround them, not only in Lopburi and Surin, but even as nearby as Nakhon Pathom (i.e., almost a suburb of Bangkok). All of the pseudo-history propounded as propaganda sits uneasily next to the self-evident monuments of pre-Thai civilizations that are right in the middle of Thailand.

§10.

Some of these contradictions are demonstrated in the most recent re-writing of Thai history that I can comment on: the efforts of Taksin’s government, and the version of history presented by the “O.K.M.D.” (Office of Knowledge Management and Development).

This might be remembered as simply another “Taksin mega-project”; it was his own version of the Fine Arts Department, with a similarly broad agenda, including the creation of new museums. One acronym gives rise to another: the OKMD created the “N.D.M.I.” (National Discovery Museum Institute). The NDMI also had a very broad mandate, and was intended to take over a series of historical sites in downtown Bangkok (generally, old buildings already owned by the government) to create a series of museums. The first NDMI museum remains open, giving a permanent statement of the version of history that Taksin’s patronage created.

It is no surprise that the central concept of the museum is “Suvannabhūmi”: Taksin liked the idea so much that he named his airport after it.

The museum repeats many important lies from the old propaganda, including the idea that two monks named Soṇa and Uttara brought Buddhism to Thailand. The museum also formally states the curators' appreciation for Prince Damrong as the inventor of Suvannabhūmi as an historical concept.

This re-telling of Thai history is also responsive to some more recent trends in European scholarship. In contrast to the old propaganda about "racial purity", there is instead a message of harmonious "racial diversity". There is dramatically less emphasis on the city of Sukhothai, and less emphasis on the unique King Ramkhamhaeng (now considered historically dubious and/or fictional, cf. James R. Chamberlain, ed., 1991, *The Ram Khamhaeng Controversy*, The Siam Society, Bangkok).

Instead of trying to prove that Thailand existed as an ancient empire (alongside Cambodia), the NDMI simply states that there were no empires, and no nation-states, prior to the modern era. They re-draw the map as a series of city-states, and then claim that all of it had always been "Suvannabhūmi". This may seem like a non-confrontational way to re-invent the myth, but it still supports the (WWII-era) political contention that neither Cambodia nor Laos existed prior to the French "stealing" them from Thailand.

The new propaganda gets rid of the (offensive) notion that the racially-superior Thai people migrated south and conquered Southeast Asia, however, it also avoids any clear timeline of anybody migrating anywhere (or anybody conquering anybody). The same old story of Suvannabhūmi is simply being re-told without admitting that war, slavery and feudalism really were important parts of Thailand's history: instead, we are given a message that the country was always built on trade, technology, and "ethnic harmony".

I will not offer a lengthy criticism of the museum's version of history in this article. However, the point here is simply this: although political concerns have changed, the myth of Suvannabhūmi is more prominent now than ever before. The Taksin government gave this term new impetus, and new prominence, presenting it as part of a new generation of propaganda. Every person who arrives at Bangkok airport is confronted with the myth of Suvannabhūmi as soon as they arrive, however it may be misspelled or mispronounced on their ticket or on the signs painted on the walls (Suwannaphum? Suvarnapoomee?).

§11.

As mentioned, from the 1930s up to 1947, the propaganda reflected different concerns, looking east from Bangkok. At that time, it seemed possible to extend Thai territory eastward, as the French Empire collapsed. Of course, the rapid rise and fall of the Japanese empire (in Southeast Asia) also encouraged expansionist schemes of this kind.

General Phibun Songkram, the same man who had (briefly) expanded Thai power into Burmese, Lao and Cambodian territory (1941–6), remained a pervading influence until 1958. In the late 1950s, the French army departed, the American army expanded its presence, and, from the Thai perspective, the war to extend Thai territory simply continued under the name of "anti-Communism".

From 1949–1961 the U.S. supported Chinese KMT (anti-Communist) troops living in Northern Thailand. The old propaganda about a war to re-conquer the so-called Thai homeland in Yunnan (as Damrong imagined it) would have seemed useful for a series of Thai governments that were then preparing for an imagined war against Communist China (with American Support).

The original "Domino Theory" was presented in 1952, as a justification for the American military to occupy former French Colonies of Indochina as a barrier against Chinese Communism: the theory compares Communist influence to a game of dominoes, and was used to explain U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asia until 1973.

In 1973, U.S. President Nixon made a pact with Communist China; this had many effects, all over the world, but it also (permanently) ended Thailand's ambitions to conquer part of Yunnan. They had already lost the possibility of conquering Shan State, and now all of their northward ambitions were made impossible. After 1973, eastward expansion was the only dream possible for the Thai military, and they became increasingly

involved in America's wars in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. The cycle of propaganda and pseudo-history continued through decades of active armed conflict on the Thai-Khmer border.

The suffering and tragedy of these wars is not the subject of this article. What I would say here, simply, is that Thai propaganda was written to support specific political objectives in each (sequent) era. The recurrent theme is that "Suvannabhūmi" is used to justify the aspiration to conquer more territory as if it had been Thai territory all along.

The Thai army invaded Laos in 1984, and then fought a larger war against Laos in 1987–8. They justified this as an attempt to win back the territory the French had stolen from Thailand.

I would here suggest that, from the Thai military's perspective, the Cambodian border conflict (ca. 2010) is similar to the Lao (ca. 1988): they do not regard the line around just one temple as the problem. They consider the entire border illegitimate. The temple is just one opportunity to challenge that border. For many Thai nationalists in the military (or for anyone who believes the propaganda) Battambang is "lost" territory that Thailand must re-conquer. The opinion that all of Cambodia should be a province of Thailand is not uncommon –and seems to be an inevitable corollary of the Suvannabhūmi pseudo-history.

Is it any surprise that the Thai military claims French Indochina was formerly part of Thailand? In general, both Thai and Khmer people in the present generation have heard some aspects of this story from their grandparents, and learn other aspects from watching television. The different parts of the story never quite fit together, they never match with the jumble of information in the newspapers.

From a Cambodian perspective, looking North and West, it is obvious that a large part of Thailand is still ethnically Khmer, despite the conquests and counter-conquests of the last 300 years of history. Many Cambodians consider Surin a natural part of Cambodia; and many Thais consider Battambang a natural part of Thailand. Of course, many Cambodians grew up in refugee camps on Thai territory (while the U.S., U.N. and the Thai military all supported Pol Pot). As a result, there are many families with ties on both sides of the disputed border.

Among the farmers on the Thai side (in the "Lower Isan", as some now call it) I think there is an unusual sense of kinship and cultural awareness, perhaps simply because there are so many looming monuments to the Cambodian culture that was once there.

In looking back over this history, and the pervasive importance of the propaganda that misrepresents it, there seems to be no cause for optimism whatsoever. My optimism, however, is not based in these facts, but merely in my experience of spending long periods of time on all sides of the borders that the current generation must cope with. Simply put, the peoples of rural Isan, Laos, and Cambodia, don't want another war. As bad as current conditions may be, they're still much better than what most of the residents became accustomed to over the last 50 years. They have demonstrated to all of us that they can both cope and thrive in the midst of some of history's greatest tragedies.

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