

# *Japan for Example* – National Character as the Driving Force of National Progress in Thai Conservative Writings about Japan

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## Abstract

Japan has been considered a role-model for the successful pursuit of ‘progress’ or national development in Siam/Thailand since the late 19th century. As this article shows, the Japanese exemplar played a significant role in Siamese/Thai political discourse, with three of the kingdom’s most important conservative thinkers – King Vajiravudh, Luang Wichit Wathakan, and Mom Ratchawong Kukrit Pramoj – writing in detail about Japanese history and interpreting Japanese battlefield and economic successes as the outcome of the national character of the Japanese. In contrast, the role of political institutions and institutional change in shaping human decisions and actions has been largely ignored by them. The message of these works is that to pursue national ‘progress’, the Siamese/Thai need to be more like the stereotypical Japanese, and become more disciplined, and patriotic, as well as cooperating for the national good rather than pursuing particular interests.

## Keywords

Japanese-Thai relations – Thai political thought – King Vajiravudh – Wichit Wathakan – Kukrit Pramoj

## 1 Introduction

On 11 March 2011, one of the strongest earthquakes ever recorded occurred off the coast of the Japanese main island of Honshu triggering a powerful tsunami, which in turn caused the nuclear disaster at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. Over twenty thousand lives were lost (Thompson 2012). Immediately after the triple disaster, condolence messages, offers of assistance, and donations began to be offered to Japan from around the world. Surprisingly to many, the Kingdom of Thailand was among the top donors to Japan with only the United States and Taiwan giving more (Japan Today 2013). Thai assistance to Japan came from various sources, ranging from the government, over private companies to ordinary citizens (Hite et al. 2011).

Among the kingdom's institutions providing aid to Japan was the Thai military. When handing over the military's contribution to a Japanese representative, then army chief General Prayuth Chan-ocha (born 1954) used the occasion to instruct his compatriots to look up to the Japanese people struck by the disasters as a role model of citizenship. Despite the hardship they were suffering, the Japanese were standing in line in a disciplined manner to wait their turn in the distribution of assistance thereby allowing the government to function effectively. There was also no plundering. According to the general, if the Thai people could likewise be united and work together to overcome challenges, the kingdom could realize its large potential. Otherwise, there were only more problems ahead (Manager Online 2011). The army chief's exhortation must have been related to reports about widespread looting after the 2004 Christmas tsunami in Western Thailand (ABC News 2004). At the same time, his comments on the exemplary behavior of the Japanese also reflect a tradition in Thai conservative political thought to reference the national character of Japanese when arguing that the Thai people are not yet ready for full democracy due to their alleged lack of unity and discipline. As the coup launched by General Prayuth three years later as well as his long-lasting government demonstrate, such arguments still have currency in Thailand (see MOFA 2014; see also Kanchanalak 2014).

This article traces the use of the Japanese exemplar in Thai conservative thought through works of three of the kingdom's most influential political thinkers: King Vajiravudh's *Japan for Example* (1912), Luang Wichit Wathakan's *History of Japan* (1930), and Kukrit Pramoj's *Japanese Scenes* (1962). That the works in question by the latter two remain in print, demonstrate their influence. In these works, Imperial Japan's prewar 'progress' and rise to a 'great power' as well as its postwar economic development is explained simply by Japanese diligence, perseverance, unity, and patriotism. Political and

institutional change is of little interest to the authors. While reflecting the political convictions of the authors, the works have clearly been influenced by Nitobe Inazō's (1862–1933) famous and bestselling explanation of the Japanese national character *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* first published in 1900, as well as international reporting about the Russo-Japanese War which turned the Japanese into an “honorary civilized nation” as a historian has put it (Kownner 2001).

## 2 Modern Japanese-Siamese Relations

The beginning of exchanges between Japan and the Kingdom of Siam can be traced to the late sixteenth century. At that time, merchant ships sailed with the monsoon winds between Southern Japan and Ayutthaya. With growing trade, a Japanese settlement emerged in the royal capital. Many of its inhabitants also served as soldiers for the kings of Siam. Under the famous headman Yamada Nagamasa, ennobled as *Okya Senaphimuk*, the Japanese community rose to wealth and power for a short period of time, and Siamese embassies were received by the early Tokugawa shoguns. Following the introduction of strict control of overseas trade and travel in the 1630s, however, further diplomatic relations were discontinued by the Japanese rulers (Iwao 1966, 237–249). Trade between Ayutthaya and Nagasaki was again permitted in the late seventeenth century. Over time, the descendants of the Japanese settlers merged with other ethnicities in Siam. A poem inscribed at Wat Phra Chetupon in central Bangkok, which can be dated to the early nineteenth century, describes the Japanese as skilled craftsmen with beautiful swords. The Japanese military unit had also been recreated after the foundation of Bangkok despite nobody identifying as Japanese anymore (Dhani 1933, 160–163; Satow 1885). At the eve of the age of colonialism in East and South East Asia, there appears to have remained an image of Japan in Siam as a country where beautiful goods were manufactured by a martial people.

It was through one of the European powers, Austria-Hungary, offering protection and transportation, that in 1875 a Japanese delegation could travel to Siam and meet King Chulalongkorn (1953–1910, reigned 1868–1910) (Keisuke 1988, 3). Modern diplomatic relations were, however, established only in 1887 with the *Declaration of Amity and Commerce between Japan and Siam*. Already two years earlier, princes and nobles posted in Europe as diplomats or studying there had proposed to follow the Japanese exemplar and draft a constitution (Nares et al. 1975).

In the following years, the reading public was kept informed about developments in Meiji Japan not only through the colonial press shipped to Bangkok but also through the local press as well as through a miniscule Japanese community in Siam. By the late nineteenth century, manufactured goods from Japan had also entered the Siamese market successfully competing with European merchandise and serving as a consumable symbol of Japanese economic progress (Swan 2009, 21; Smyth 1898, 226).

### 3 A Royal Role-Model: Japanese-Siamese Relations after the First Sino-Japanese War

In a critical lecture on Japanese nationalism given in Japan in 1916, the first non-European winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), noted that it has been victory in war alone, which had made the colonial powers accept and respect Japan (Tagore 1917, 102–103). The same observation can be made in Siam as well. At the court of Bangkok, it was the unexpected victory over China that resulted in Imperial Japan being discovered as a role-model for the successful adoption of Western technologies and institutions. Only three years later, the *Treaty of Friendship, Commerce and Navigation between Japan and Siam* was ratified. It granted Japan consular jurisdiction. In return, however, a Japanese legal adviser would support the Siamese effort to codify its law codes as a first step towards renegotiating the unequal treaties. Other, less prominent, advisers were hired by the royal government as well (Yoneo and Yoshikawa 1987). At the time, in a letter to his Belgian adviser, the monarch wrote of his ‘envy’ of Japanese progress (Tips 1992, 218).

On his return trip after finishing education in Britain, Crown Prince Vajiravudh (1881–1925, reigned 1910–1925) would spend approximately one month traveling through Japan, meeting Emperor Meiji as well as other high dignitaries, and visiting a number of institutions exemplifying Japanese ‘progress’ and power. After the Russo-Japanese War, the royal government also sent naval students to Japan and bought warships from the shipyards in Kawasaki and Kobe (Malitz 2016, 191–193). More than anything else, however, Siamese princes appear to have been impressed by the Japanese loyalty towards their emperor. The tradition of the king handing graduates of the military academy their certificate personally was adopted from Japan (Thep 2022, 14, 49; Thai National Archives, R.5/98).

The *Royal Rescript on National Education* of 1910, the year of King Chulalongkorn’s death, was informed by and modelled on the *Japanese*

*Imperial Rescript on Education*, which had been issued in October 1890 to instill loyalty and patriotism into students by having them memorize the text (Chulalongkorn 1949). But admiration of Japanese successes on the battlefields and in the diplomatic arena was not limited to the royal court. In Bangkok, Japanese exploits in war were not only to be found on newspaper pages but were also shown in the first public cinema operated by a Japanese businessman (Barmé 2002, 44–45; Bangkok Times 9 September 1905, 8). The Crown Prince Vajiravudh himself contributed by translating newspaper articles about the war into Thai (Greene 1999, 5). The Russo-Japanese War cemented in the kingdom the stereotypical image of the Japanese as united in patriotism, brave, and diligent (e.g., Torpedo 24 January 1922, 3; Thai Num 11 August 1929, 4, 17; Trairong 14 December 1932, 2). This image of the Japanese was replicated in early Siamese travelogues (Bangkok Times 11 October 1922, 4) and the first Thai novel set in Japan (Siburapha 2000, 57).

Opinions differed, however, in regard to the question of why Japan had been victorious. The modern middle class, which had emerged following Siam's integration into the capitalist global economy and a series of domestic reforms, did not believe that loyalty alone could explain the Japanese successes. Frustrated with limited career opportunities, they had begun to criticize the absolute monarchy demanding political reforms. Accordingly, critical journalists such as the famous Thianwan and K. S. R. Kulap argued that it had been the political reforms that had taken place in Imperial Japan, which had turned the Japanese into hardworking and courageous patriots. Initially, such calls for political change could be ignored or lampooned. But this was not a feasible course of action anymore after a conspiracy was discovered in the military to overthrow the absolute monarchy by coup d'état in 1912. In a document used to recruit others, the plotters explicitly argued that constitutional government had made Japan great. This argument can be found in the press throughout the period of the absolute monarchy (see in detail Malitz 2022).

#### 4 *Japan for Example: Personal Loyalty not Institutions*

Among the responses of King Vajiravudh to the conspiracy was a series of essays published under the penname Asvabahu to argue against the suitability of a constitutional and parliamentary government for Siam. Written in 1912 shortly after the failed coup, *Japan for Example* was explicitly written as a response to critics bringing up “the case of Japan” and to argue that “Japan has

attained her present position, not on account of parliamentarism, but rather in spite of it". For the king, who had studied not only at Oxford but also at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, Japan's "greatness" was acquired through the victories over China and Russia (Asvabahu 1912, 49, 62).

*Japan for Example* does not mention the bestselling *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* by Nitobe Inazō's (1862–1933). But "bushido", the "practical code of morals of the Samurai class", which "still continued to exercise its moral influence upon the modern Japanese" is explicitly referred to. It seems certain that the king had read it (Asvabahu 1912, 52). Indeed, *Bushido* had been published in 1900, when the then crown prince was still studying in Britain. He would then also spend about four weeks between mid-December 1902 to mid-January 1903 in Japan during his return trip to Siam. In his most famous work, the Japanese Christian educator explicitly made the case that the victory over China was due to the Japanese spirit of chivalry and not simply the wholesale introduction of modern institutions and technology (Nitobe 1905, 187–189). Strikingly, despite first coming out a decade after the promulgation of the Meiji Constitution and the opening of the Imperial Diet, the book on the assumed Japanese national character mentions neither.

For the king the only explanation for the "extreme courage" of Japanese soldiers as well as other non-specified deeds in peacetime was the "keynote of Japanese life," loyalty towards the emperor, which was conceptually collapsed into patriotism (Asvabahu 1912, 62–64). Analyzing the constitutional system of Meiji Japan, King Vajiravudh then argued that due to the influence of the elder statesmen of the Meiji restoration, the genrō, Imperial Japan was a "bureaucratic monarchy" and its parliamentarism still at the experimental stage. The empire could therefore not serve as a role-model for the adoption of constitutional and parliamentary government in Siam, which in any case would take hundreds of years to take root (Asvabahu 1912, 70–71, 75).

The Japanese pursuit of rapid 'progress' had further been possible because the Japanese were "as a race, both industrious and thrifty". This was, however, not simply a positive character trait they had been endowed with by providence but due to the scarcity of arable land as well as widespread poverty (Asvabahu 1912, 60–61). To pursue 'progress' as fast as possible was thus not desirable, an argument also made by King Vajiravudh in one of his most famous pieces *Clogs on our Wheels*. Rather modernizing one's country carefully and slowly would avoid unnecessary conflict and hardship and would thus be superior in the long-run (see Asvabahu 1912, 49, 75; Asvabahu 21 April 1915, 4; also Prajadhipok 1927, 2–3).

At the end, the king's arguments against the suitability of parliamentary governance for contemporary Siam, nor his rejection of the exemplar of

Japanese constitutionalism convinced his critics. For example, in a series on the history of Japan, the Thai Num newspaper argued that because the lower house was elected under the Meiji Constitution, Japan still qualified as a democracy (Thai Num 8 September 1929, 4).

## 5 *The History of Japan as a Case Study of the Human Revolution*

Among the readers of King Vajiravudh's *Japan for Example*, was likely also a novice in Wat Mahatat, who later adopted the name Wichit Wathakan (1898–1962). Wichit would become an ennobled diplomat serving in Europe, a famous publisher of self-help and historical works, an influential ideologue after the 1932 revolution, and an important adviser to military strongmen Phibunsongkhram and Sarit Thanarat (see Barmé 1993, 4; Akira 1993, 27–28). He explicitly pointed out the influence of Asvabahu's writing on his own works (Wathakan 1932, 197).

Serving all regimes from the absolute monarchy to the cold-war despotism of the Sarit years, makes Luang Wichit Wathakan the ultimate survivor in Thai history. To write him simply off as a mere opportunist would however be a profound misunderstanding. What connects his various careers with his self-help books, propaganda, and historical works is the idea that social change is simply the outcome of changes in collective attitudes. Influencing positively how people think thus can shape the fate of the nation. He summarized this worldview in his speech on the *Human Revolution* which acknowledged the significance of political change but emphasized as of much greater importance for national progress the collective changes in attitudes and behaviors (Wathakan 1939). Wichit's influence on Thailand's political culture and thought is evident in the fact that many of his works remain in print nearly a century after he began publishing.

Being posted to the Siamese embassy in Paris during the 1920s, Luang Wichit Wathakan was also a member of the kingdom's delegation to the League of Nations in Geneva. There he personally got to know Nitobe Inazō (1862–1933), who was one of the league's founding under-secretaries. In a newspaper article in 1937, he claimed that it was from Nitobe himself that he had learnt about Japanese "culture and civilization" (Siam Chronicle 4 April 1937 quoted in Reynolds 1988, 61, 85fn68). One of the first books that he published after his return to Siam was *Mahaburut*, a collection of biographies of 'great men,' who had shaped the fate of their nations. Importantly, they were not men born rulers, but individuals, who like Wichit himself, had through ambition, intelligence, and diligence risen far above the station in life they had been



born in. The only Asian included was Ōkubo Toshimichi (1830–1878), one of the leaders of the Meiji restoration (Barmé 1993, 53).

Wichit's magnum opus was his multi-volume *Universal History*, the first volume of which was published in 1929. Two forces drive the national histories contained in it, great men and national characters shaped by nature, including assumed racial traits, as well as historical developments. The differences between political regimes and institutional change, but also social conflict within countries in contrast are of much less interest. As he summarized in the chapter on the history of Japan first published in 1930, the "Japanese progress and power of Japan stems from the positive characteristics of the Japanese, who are diligent, patriotic, and brave" (Wathakan 1930, 126). What makes the history of Japan especially instructive to the Siamese according to Wichit is that as an equally Asian country, one could learn from this "nation of warriors and of scholars" who had lifted themselves from a "lowly position to be a great power" to be "highly civilized" between the time of the Meiji Restoration and their victory over Russia in 1905 (Wathakan 1930, 2, 17). He also pointed out that the influence of the empire in Siam would only increase (Wathakan 1930, 20–21).

The national character of the Japanese, and the foundation of Japan's position of a great power at the time of writing, was one of "bravery and patriotism," unmatched by others (Wathakan 1930, 8). Japanese patriotism showed itself in the "love of their nation and the emperor," and was linked to the Japanese "love of family" (Wathakan 1930, 19, 34–53). It was explained by the influences of the 'racial origin' of the Japanese, the geography of the Japanese archipelago, and historical developments on the islands. 'Racially', the Japanese were said to be a mix of "Mongols and Malays" resulting in their being "warriors and artists" simultaneously (Wathakan 1930, 32–33). Japanese perseverance and diligence meanwhile emerged due to the constant threat and experience of natural disasters such as earthquakes (Wathakan 1930, 126). The long history of warfare among themselves had made the Japanese "respect and obey their commanders, be diligent and perseverant, seek not only their own advantage, as well as hold all the other traits that make a good soldier" (Wathakan 1930, 74). Japanese diligence, perseverance, and bravery were of course demonstrated to the world during their war against Russia.

In contrast to *Japan for Example* and indeed *Bushido*, the commoner and commercial publisher Wichit explained Japanese heroism not simply through loyalty towards the emperor alone. Rather, the Japanese people had realized that the war against Russia was the "most important war" in national history and therefore fought for national survival (Wathakan 1930, 115). Covering the Meiji Constitution and the opening of the Imperial Diet in his *History of Japan* for his middleclass readership while still a 'royal servant' in the ministry of



foreign affairs under the absolute monarchy meanwhile demanded finesse. According to Wichit, Emperor Meiji had promised his subjects to open a parliament after ten years, if they by then had proven themselves capable to participate in national politics. The Japanese prepared themselves diligently and the emperor kept his word (Wathakan 1930, 106).

## 6 *Scenes from Japan* and the Buddhist Roots of Japan's Postwar Economic Miracle

Defeated in war, its cities in ruins, and occupied by a foreign power, Japan had lost its luster as a role model for Siam/Thailand in the immediate postwar period. Luang Wichit Wathakan adjusted the introduction to his *History of Japan* accordingly. In his 1930 version, he had stressed that there was much to learn from Japanese history. But in the second edition that he published in 1950, he likened the Japanese with mountaineers who had crashed down from the summit of a mountain (Wathakan 1950, 343).

The postwar economic miracle would return Japan's status as an exemplar for the Thais to follow in their quest for prosperity and progress. A postwar edition of the *Great Men* included a summary of Nitobe's Bushido presenting the "samurai spirit" as the national character of the Japanese. It then offered the Japanese entrepreneur and founder of the pearl cultivation industry Mikimoto Kōkichi (1858–1954) rather than a general or war hero as an example of Japanese perseverance and hard work (Wathakan 1963, 75–138, 213). For those Thais wishing to see democratic governance in Thailand, however, Japan had lost its lackluster in the postwar period. Briefly in 1946 and 1947, a liberal democracy with universal suffrage and a fully elected parliament had been achieved. Conservatives, however, continued to value Japanese diligence, perseverance, and discipline, but were skeptical of the democratic reforms of the US occupational authorities – as well as their embrace by young people. This is exemplified in *Japanese Scenes* by the low-ranking aristocrat, banker, publisher, politician, and one-time prime minister Mom Ratchawong Kukrit Pramoj (1911–1995; in office 1975–1976), who also played a leading role in the revival of the monarchy as the nation's cultural and moral center from the 1950s onward. Kukrit spent the war years in Siam/Thailand and developed good relations with the Japanese and most importantly with the commander of the Japanese forces Nakamura Aketo (1889–1966) (Pramoj 2011a, 274–275). In 1955, Kukrit thanked him and likened Japan to the mother of Asian independence (Ching 2012, 217). First published in 1962, *Japanese Scenes* is a book-length summary of his interpretation of Japanese history based on his

own observations about Japan and the changing Japanese society after several visits to the country (Pramoj 2011a, 11). It remains in print.

Kukrit, similar to Luang Wichit Wathakan, saw the rise of Imperial Japan to become one of the five great powers after World War I as a “success story” [in English in the original], that taught the value of individuals sacrificing for the common good as genuine patriots rather than pursuing their own interests (Pramoj 2011a, 13, 134, 146, 158). In line with the arguments made in *Japan for Example* and the *History of Japan*, this success story was unrelated to Imperial Japan’s constitutional government. Indeed, according to Kukrit, the proclamation of the Meiji Constitution and the opening of the Imperial Diet followed neither Emperor Meiji’s desire to grant his subjects constitutional government nor was it a response to the public demand for political participation. It had been the foreign powers that had demanded this change as a prerequisite for the renegotiation of the unequal treaties (Pramoj 2011a, 142–143).

Kukrit explains the Japanese descent into authoritarianism and militarism in the 1930s leading to the war with China and World War II as a response to the lack of cultural roots of the democratic institutions in Japan. Once Emperor Meiji and his elder statesmen had passed away, power fell into the hand of egoistic and corrupt politicians leading to a backlash from military men. This was not unlike the situation in Thailand prior to the coup by Sarit in 1957, which he himself supported (Pramoj 2011a, 163–183). Similarly, Kukrit argued that it was still too early to judge whether postwar Japan had become an established democracy and that one might have to wait another twenty or fifty years. He was, however, sure that the American-written and American-style constitution was unsuitable for the Japanese, who in his eyes were revering the emperor after the war just as much as before, as was evident in the election victories of conservatives, and were still preferring the “old ways” (Pramoj 2011a, 38, 40, 44–45, 64–67, 141–158, 205–213, 291–294; Pramoj 2011b, 171–177).

Kukrit, like King Vajiravudh, stressed the importance of the virtue of “loyalty” to one’s family, as well as emperor and nation, in Japanese culture and dedicated one chapter to “bushido” (Pramoj 2011a, 32–48, 44, 44–60). *Japanese Scenes* emphasized the positive influence of various schools of Buddhism on Japanese culture and the Japanese national character. This interpretation mirrored Kukrit’s differentiation between worldly and spiritual aspects of Buddhism when writing about Thailand. He reserved the latter for the monkhood, with the simpler and this-worldly teachings of Buddhism providing ethics for political stability and economic progress (Itō 2012, 118–119). Teaching the people studiousness, self-control, and determination, Buddhism had been the real driving force behind Japan’s ‘progress’ and prosperity (Pramoj 2011a, 61–74). This applied also to the postwar economic miracle, which had surprised

him when visiting Japan after the war. Not only had the country recovered from the devastation of the war economically but also technologically. For him at least, Japanese companies had become the equals, of their American competitors (Pramoj 2011a, 212–213, 273, 276). One could, according to Pramoj (2011a), ascribe this to the Japanese's possession of the four 'bases of power' (Pali: *iddhipāda*), but he himself would not go as far. These 'powers', which could be loosely translated as determination, concentration, consciousness, and power of contemplation, form a basis for the pursuit of enlightenment according to the Pali Canon (283).

The conservative writer and politician also shared his reservations about postwar Japan. The defeat in war, he observed, had devalued for the younger Japanese old beliefs and customs: "morals and values, which Japan had held since the past are vanishing." In the postwar period of high economic growth, "as there is nothing to replace them, most people only believe in money". Kukrit saw this deterioration not only in the widespread acceptance of American culture but also in students becoming communists or unruly demonstrations on the streets. He, nonetheless, did not propose means to reverse or halt these social changes (Pramoj 2011a, 60, 204, 279–283, 286–289, 293).

## 7 Conclusion

King Vajiravudh, Luang Wichit Wathakan, and Mom Ratchawong Kukrit Pramoj are three of Thailand's most important conservative thinkers. They all have written about modern and contemporary Japanese history and what the Thais could learn from it. What they have in common is a worldview, which explains social change, and 'progress' in particular, simply as the outcome of the collective behavior shaped by the Japanese national character. The lesson for the Thai reader is to work harder, be more diligent, be more patriotic, and to be more loyal to their king and government, while thinking less about their own benefit. Then the nation would prosper and, so one can assume, everybody would be better off. The idea that institutional change could mold the behavior, so that even those pursuing their own interests would contribute to the common good is alien to the three texts. This interpretation of modern and contemporary Japanese history remains influential as also demonstrated by the title of a 2004 monograph by Thailand's premier academic publisher, which is literally titled *The Japanese Built their Nation through Love and Loyalty* (Khlangsuwan 2004).

There are also important differences among the works in how the three authors explained the character traits of the Japanese, which they saw as

the drivers of national 'progress'. These reflect ideological differences among the writers. King Vajiravudh stressed foremost loyalty toward the emperor as the all-important motivation of the Japanese both on and off the battlefield. Self-made man, seller of self-help books, and ideologue to two military strongmen, Luang Wichit Wathakan, additionally stressed that the Japanese were selflessly sacrificing themselves and improving themselves for the nation, but thereby also improving on their station in life. Conservative writer and politician Kukrit Pramoj, who saw Buddhism as a belief system that could stabilize society politically while allowing for economic growth, worked out how Japanese Buddhism had been the real driving force of Japanese successes and how its decline was contributing to social ills after the war.

Since the publication of *Japanese Scenes*, pop cultural productions providing positive depictions of Japanese characters have further entrenched the stereotypical views of the Japanese as diligent, industrious, and patriotic. Here one must first mention the TV-series *Oshin* about the – literal – rags to riches story of a Japanese woman starting in the Meiji period and shown in Thailand in the early 1980s (Takashi 1998). One must further not forget the romantic novel *Khu Kam* about the tragic love affair between a Japanese officer and a patriotic Thai woman, which has been in print since its first appearance in 1965 but has also been adapted for TV, cinema, and even the musical stage (Thommayanti 2008, Prasannam 2018).

Against the backdrop of Japanese economic stagnation and the rise of the People's Republic of China offering a role-model for rapid economic growth and development of high-technology in combination with an autocratic government, Japan has lost much of its attractiveness as role-model for Thai conservatives. Yet, as the comments by General Prayuth Chan-o-cha in the introduction show, ascribing Japanese economic development to its people's national character remains a politically powerful trope in Thailand despite its century old pedigree.

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