

# “White Elephant” the King’s Auspicious Animal

Usa Klompan<sup>1</sup>, Napark Wootvatansa<sup>2</sup>, Kan Kanjanapimai<sup>3</sup>,  
Khanuengnit Ariyatugun<sup>4</sup>, and Panuwat Pantakod<sup>5</sup>

## Abstract

White elephants were majestic animals living beside Thai king for ages. They were trained for many purposes, for example, being king’s vehicle both in daily life and in the war as well as being part of the royal rituals. Therefore, white elephants were seen as the king’s auspicious animal. Once the era changed, white elephants’ roles had been altered.

According to Gaja Sastra, the textbook indicating the physical characteristics of good elephants, white elephants consist of seven auspicious physical characteristics: white eyes, white hard palate, white toenails, white hair, white skin or light reddish brown skin, white tail hair, and white skin or light reddish brown testis. White elephants who have all those seven characteristics are called, in Thai, “Chang Som Kan” while white elephants whose characteristics don’t fit all are called “Chang Pra Lad” or “Chang Si Pra Lad.” In addition, if elephants have black skin, banana-flower-shape ivory, and black toenails, they will be called “Chang Niam.” Although belief on elephants in Thailand was influenced from India, Thai’s belief is a bit different based on Thai culture and tradition which had been mixed between Buddhism and Brahma-Hindu. Therefore, Thai white elephants would be different from white elephants in other areas.

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<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Surindra Rajabhat University, Thailand;  
e-mail : usa\_tek@hotmail.com

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Surindra Rajabhat University, Thailand;  
e-mail : peeraya.envi@gmail.com

<sup>3</sup>Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Surindra Rajabhat University, Thailand;  
e-mail : saucearms@hotmail.com

<sup>4</sup>Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Surindra Rajabhat University, Thailand;  
e-mail : khwan.ari@gmail.com

<sup>5</sup>Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Surindra Rajabhat University, Thailand;  
e-mail : pantakod.pa@gmail.com

White elephants took their parts as Thai king's animal because they represented the charisma of their possessors. One example could be seen through the biography of Lord Buddha indicating that there was a white elephant appeared in Buddha mother's dream before he was born. According to Brahma-Hindu belief, white elephant was a symbol of greatness, thus Buddha would become the great human being. Apart from this, relating to Brahma-Hindu belief, white elephants were seen as the national animal.

In present, white elephants have been Thai national animals which have been legally preserved under Thai law. They also are the symbol of being Thai people. Moreover, they symbolizes the relationship among three institutes of Thailand: nation, religion, and king.

**Keywords :** Elephant, White elephant, Auspicious animal, King

## Introduction

Asian elephants (*Elephas Maximus*) are found in the forest of Thailand, India, Burma, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia. Asian elephants are 3-meter tall when they are completely grown up. They are clever and could be trained to be human labor or to perform the ordered gestures. Their ears are wide and big which the rims are at the head level. Their trunks consist of only one beak. Their backs are curved. Their forelegs consist of five toenails while the hind-leg toenails are only four. In Thailand, the male elephants are called "Chang Plai" as they have the ivory while the female ones, who have no ivory, are called "Chang Pang." If the female elephant has a very short ivory, she will be called "Chang Ka Nai" while the male elephant with no ivory will be called "Chang See Dor." Moreover, there was a group of dwarf elephants which were called "Chang Kom" appeared at the seaside forest in Song Kla Province, Thailand. Unfortunately, they were extinct (Joubert D., 2006 : 238-250). Besides, Thai elephants or Asian elephants have different manners comparing to elephants in other places. They also represent the abundance of forest as elephants balance the forest ecology.

In human society (Anthropocene), elephants were caught and trained to be used for many purposes: for example, towing timbers, being human vehicle both in daily life and in the war, and being part of rituals. Therefore, catching elephants to be used and trained was important. That made human combined knowledges on types and specific physical characteristics of good elephants which were then called

“Kotchakam” or method of elephant catching. This was assumed as the origin of “Gaja Sastra,” the ancient textbook indicating seven physical characteristics of good elephants which worth catching. In addition, this textbook was influenced by the belief on elephant in India which spread over Southeast Asia including Thailand. According to Gaja Sastra, one of the most important kind of elephants was a group of white elephants.

White elephants consist of seven auspicious physical characteristics: white eyes, white hard palate, white toenails, white hair, white skin or light reddish brown skin, white tail hair, and white skin or light reddish brown testis. White elephants who have all those seven characteristics are called, in Thai, “Chang Som Kan” while white elephants whose characteristics don’t fit all are called “Chang Pra Lad” or “Chang Si Pra Lad.” In addition, if elephants have black skin, banana-flower-shape ivory, and black toenails, they will be called “Chang Niam.” These three kinds of elephants were seen as the auspicious animals which belong only to the king. Apart from this, there were four families of elephants dividing due to God in Brahma-Hindu belief: Brahma family, Shiva family, Vishnu family, and Agni family.

Catching white elephants to be used in royal activities needs to pay attention to the auspicious characteristics indicating in Kotchalakshanra (one part of Gaja Sastra explaining characteristics of good white elephants). Belief on elephants in Thailand is partial different to the belief in India. This is due to the mixture of two religions growing in Thailand, Buddhism and Brahma-Hindu. Thais integrated beliefs on Gaja Sastra (Brahma-Hindu) and the charisma king (Buddhism). That is a reason why Thais see the king as a fictional deity. As a divine king, white elephants are needed as they symbolized the high charisma of the king. This can be seen through Thai history that Thai Kings always have white elephants beside their thrones to be used not only in the war but also in royal rituals.

In the reign of King Rama IX, Kingdom of Thailand, role and condition of white elephants were still remained. King Rama IX possessed ten white elephants but the most important one was named “Phra Sawetadulayadetphahon,” a white elephant in Brahma family. Those white elephants were separated and treated by the Elephant Institute of Thailand which located in all parts of Thailand. According to Thai legislation in 1921, white elephants were legally preserved. The legislation stated on not only how to catch and treat white elephants but also the penalty for those who broke the law. Apart from being preserved by Thai legislation, white elephants are

seen as the mascot of Thailand. This can be seen through logo, flag, animated cartoon, sports, tourism, ambassador, or names which related to white elephants. In other words, white elephants play an important role for Thai society since the past until now.

## White elephants in Kotchalakshanra

Gaja Sastra was a textbook which was divided into two main parts: Kotchalakshanra (describing the physical characteristics of good and bad elephant species) and Kotchagam (explaining how to catch, train, and treat wild elephants as well as the rituals and magic spells using to control those elephants). The best elephant, relating to Kotchalakshanra, was called “White Elephant” which was assumed to have light skin tone or white skin. However, good white elephants had no need to always have white or light skin tone, they only needed to have at least three out of seven physical characteristics indicating in Gaja Sastra.

### 1. Types of White Elephants

Transferring Gaja Sastra belief to Thai legislation 1921, there are three kinds of white elephants: Chang Sam Kan, Chang Si Pra Lad, and Chang Niam. These three kinds of white elephants are belong to Thai king. Thus, people who found one of those kinds of white elephants (both new born elephants and caught elephants) must present them to his majesty the king.

The term “Chang Sam Kan” means elephants who have all seven auspicious characteristics as follow:

- 1) white eyes,
- 2) white hard palate,
- 3) white toenails,
- 4) white hair,
- 5) white or light reddish brown skin,
- 6) white tail hair,
- 7) white or light reddish brown testis.

Besides, if elephants have only one out of those seven characteristics, they will be called “Chang Pra Lad” or “Chang Si Pra Lad.” In case that elephants have three special characteristics: black skin, banana-flower-shape ivory, and black toenails, they will be called “Chang Niam.”

## 2. Elephant Families

According to Brahma-Hindu belief, there were four families of elephants which were called after the name of God in Brahma-Hindu. Firstly, Shiva family, elephants who were given birth by God Shiva. They were seen as a monarch class of elephants and the one who possessed them would have lots of wealth and power. Secondly, Brahma family, elephants who were given birth by God Brahma. They were seen as a priest class of elephants. The one who possessed them would have long life and be intellectual. Thirdly, Vishnu family, elephants who were given birth by God Vishnu. They were seen as a middle class of elephants. The one who possessed them would have victory over the enemy and be able to bring fertility to the land. Lastly, Agni family, elephants who were given birth by God Agni. They were seen as a lowest class of elephants. The one who possessed them would be able to bring unity and restrain the war.

In addition to those four families, there was one more elephant family which was called “Amnuay Family.” This family was a combination of elephants in those four families. Their qualifications were similar to the elephants in Agni family (Aree Tongkaew, 2535: 61-62). Amnuay family was divided into three categories: the first-class white elephants – king’s vehicle, the second-class white elephants – king’s vehicle in the battle field, and the third-class white elephants – king’s auspicious elephants.

## White Elephants and Thai King

The integration of Brahma-Hindu and Buddhism in Thailand formed a special version of belief on elephants. This version was blended by Thai culture, tradition, and belief of Thai people as follow.

### 1. Belief on Elephants and Thai King

In Thailand, the bond of Thai King and white elephants is permanently strong based on Brahma-Hindu and Buddhism belief. They stood beside Thai King as his auspicious animals who brought wealth, prosperity, and power to their possessors. In Thailand, the king was seen as a fictional deity relating to Brahma-Hindu belief. He was the avatar of God Indra, the supreme deity. The burden beast of Indra was a mythological white elephant named Airavatha. Therefore, when Indra was born as the king he would have a white elephant as his vehicle. Besides, one more belief on white elephants could be seen through the biography of Lord Buddha indicating that

there was a white elephant appeared in Buddha mother's dream before he was born. As white elephant symbolized the greatness, thus Buddha, who was born as the king, would become the great human being.

Moreover, white elephants are seen as the symbol of kingship as they symbolize the high charisma of their possessors. Thai white elephants would be appointed the positions as if they were human. Their positions would be from the prince or princess to high government officials. This way of thought would rely on Thai belief that seeing white elephants as the head of all elephants.

## 2. White elephants and Thai King in Thai history

In the past, Thai elephants were used as labors and vehicles. Whenever white elephants were found, they would be presented to the king. If those white elephants had characteristics as stated in Kotchalakshanra, the king would accept and celebrate them as his auspicious animal. Accepted white elephants were called "Chang Ton" which were divided into three groups: white elephants used in the war, white elephants whose characteristics fit one of seven auspicious characteristics explaining in Kotchalakshanra, and white elephants who have got all seven auspicious characteristics.

White elephants had been used in the ancient wars. They were important to Thai troops. In the battle, the king or the warlord would be on the his elephant's back using the war scythe fighting in front of his enemy while his elephant fought with the opponent one. If the elephant was strong and was able to fight over the foe, the king or the warlord would have more chance to win the enemy or even got the victory in that battle. There were many white elephants used in the war since the period of Ayutthaya kingdom. King Borommatriai Lokanat, 8<sup>th</sup> King of Ayutthaya Kingdom, was the first king who had been presented the first white elephant of Ayutthaya Kingdom. According to this, he was named as "The White Elephant King" (Somthawin Ninwilai and Sirihcrai Wangcharoen, 2009 : 54).

Moreover, there was a legend of Queen Si Suriyothai, the great feminist, who was on white elephant's back and took a battle in front of Burmese with her beloved King Maha Chakkraphat. She sacrificed herself to save her husband's life. This brought the victory to King Maha Chakkraphat. The white elephant of King Maha Chakkraphat was called "Chao Phraya Chaiya Nupab." After the victory over Burmese, he was named "Chao Phraya Prab Hongs." Besides, the white elephant of Eka Thotsarot, the king's younger brother, was called "Chao Phraya Prab Tri Jak." After that, in the

Kingdom of Thonburi, there was a chaotic among Thai people. Thus, the enemy took an advantage on this matter to fight over the kingdom. King Taksin was the one who gathered Thais and took a battle on his white elephant until he won the war (Thai elephants in historical war, 2018).

As white elephants always appeared beside Thai king and Thai Kingdom, Thai used their figures in the national flag since in the reign of King Rama II. Until the reign of King Rama VI who changed Thai national administration, a white-elephant figure was erased from Thai national flag (Suttilak Ampanwong, 1999 : 16)

### **3. Auspicious Elephants of Thai Kings**

Thailand has long been ruled by kings for many reigns and in each reign, elephants have taken an important role from the past until the present days. Elephants were seen as animals that enhance the prestige of every Thai king. Based on the Buddhist belief, the lord Buddha was born as a great elephant and lived up to 500 lives. Thus, this makes elephants the valuable animals of Thai people. (King's auspicious elephants. 2018)

#### **Sukhothai Kingdom**

The 1<sup>st</sup> inscription stone of King Ram Khamhaeng stated that King Ram Khamhaeng the great had won the elephant battle over the Khun Samchon, the ruler of Muang Samchod. After the victory, King Ram Khamhaeng's favorite elephant named Arujagi was dressed up with the royal elephant clothing and taken to temples around Aranyik to make merit.

#### **Ayutthaya Kingdom**

In Ayutthaya kingdom, white elephants with special characteristics were brought to the king as majestic animals as in the following details.

In the reign of King Intharacha II, there was one white elephant but the name was unidentified.

In the reign of King Chairachathirat, there was a white elephant named Phra Chatthan.

In the reign of King Maha Chakkraphat, white elephants were highly valued. There were altogether seven king's white elephants named Phra Khachen Tharodom, Phra Rattanakas, Phra Kaewsongbat, Phra Borom Kraisorn, Chaophraya Boromkachen Chat Than, and a mother elephant and a baby elephant.

In the reign of King Phetracha, there were two king's white elephants named Phra Indra Ayaphot and Phra Borom Rattanakas.

In the reign of King Suriyenthrathibodi (Sanphet VIII or Phra Chao Sua), there were one king's white elephant named Phra Borom Traichak.

In the reign of King Borommarachathirat III, there were six king's white elephants named Phra Vichian Hassadin, Phra Borom Ratchanaken, Phra Borom Vichai Khachen, Phra Borom Kunchon, Phra Borom Chakpanhatthi, and Phra Borom Kotchalak.

### **Thonburi Kingdom**

King Taksin the Great or the King of Thonburi was given a female white elephant before he led his army to round up Fang (The northern part of Lanna Kingdom in the 13<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries). After the battle, Fang ruler fled with his elephant and was later on caught and a baby elephant was brought to Taksin the Great.

### **Rattanakosin Kingdom**

In the reign of King Rama I or Phra Phutthayotfa Chulalok, there were 10 white elephants named Phra Boromkraisorn (Bavorupradit), Phra Boromkraisorn (Bavorbussathan), Phra Indra-ayara), Phra Thepkunchon, Phra Boromchatthan, Phra Boromnakkhamani, Phra Borom Kotchalak (Akkhachen), Phra Boromnaken, Phra Boromkotchalak (Akkhachatdamphahatthi), and Phra Borom-ekthon)

In the reign of King Rama II or Phra Phutthaloetla Naphalai, there were six white elephants named, Phraya Sawetkunchorn, Phra Boromnaken, Phra Boromhassadin, Phra Boromnaken (khachentharathan), Phraya Sawetayara, and Phraya Sawetkotchalak.

In the reign of King Rama III or King Namgkla, there were 20 white elephants named Phra Boromkotchalak, Phra Boromayara, Phra Boromnakhen, Phra Boromekthan, Phraya Mongkolhassadin, Phraya Mongkolnakhin, Phra Boromkraisorn, Phra Boromkunchorn, Phang Hongsasawan, Phra Nak Khanakhen, Phra Boromayares, Phra Boromsangkhathan, Phra Boromkotchalak (Sakdisanchumprasat), Phra Boromnakkakhachen, Phra Nak henthonnakha, Phra Boromthasanakha, Phlai Sipralad (male elephant with unusual color), Phra Boromsupharat, Phraya Mongkolkatchapong, and Phlai Krajuddam.

In the reign of King Rama IV or King Mongkut, there were 15 white elephants named Phra Boromnakkhatsombat, Phra Wimolrattaanakirini, Phra Boromkotcharat, Phra Wisutrattanakirini, Phra Pichainillakhan, Phra Pichai Kritsanawan, Phra Sisakonkrit, Phra Mahasisawetwimonwan, Phang Phueak-ek (first class, of three classes, white female elephant), Phra Sawetsawannaphaphan, Phang Phueak-ek, Phra Thevasiam Mahaphikhanesuan, Chang Sipralad, Chaophraya Praptraijak, and Phraya Chaiyanuphap.

In the reign of King Rama V, there were 19 white elephants named Phra Sawetworawan, Phra Mahaphiphankotchapong, Phra Sawetsuwaphawan, Phra Thepkotcharattanakirini, Phra Sisawatsawetwan, Phra Boromthantaworalak, Phra Sawetworalak, Phra Sawetworasanphang, Phra Sawetsunthonsawat, Phra Sawetsakonwaropas, Phra Sawetrujiraphaphan, Phra Sawetworanakhen, Phlai Phueak-ek, Phra Sisawetwannipha, Phra Sawet-udomwan, Chaophraya Chaiyanuphap, and two Phlai Sipralads (male elephant with unusual color).

In the reign of King Rama VI (King Vajiravudh), Phra Sawetwetchiraphaha was the monarch's white elephant.

In the reign of King Rama VII (King Prajadhipok), Phra Sawetwetkotchadetdilok was the monarch's white elephant.

In the reign of King Rama VIII (King Bhumibol Adulyadej), there were 10 white elephant named Phra Sawetadulayadetphahon, Phra Sawetworarattanakri, Phra Sawetsurakachathan, Phra Sisawetsupphalak, Phra Sawetsutthawilas, Phra Wimlrottanakirini, Phra Sinararattaratkirini, Phra Sawetphasurakhachen, Phra Theprattanakirini, and Phra Boromnakhatat.

According to the above mentioned reasons, elephants thus related to the Thai kings, in the dimension of Brahman-Hindu belief as stated in the Gaja Sastra. Elephants also represent power, wealth, perfections, and monarchy. In the history aspect, white elephants are directly related to every Thai Kings as can be seen from history where elephants were used in many important battles throughout history.

## White elephants in present days

Now a days, elephants are no longer used in wars thus the role of elephants has changed. Typical elephants are used for labor in the wild or the tourism industry which results in the deceasing roles of elephants in Thai society. Heavy machines are used instead of elephants thus the roles of elephants have shifted to tourism

purposes as can be seen in Surin, Buriram, Lampang, Phuket, Chiang Mai, and Ayutthaya's tourism. The status of white elephants, however, has not been changed. They are still important as they are the valuable and auspicious animals of Thai kings and Thai nation.

### **1. The current situation of Thai elephants**

According to The Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation of Thailand' survey. It was found that there are 3,500 – 6,000 wild elephants living in 68 conserved forests in 7 regional forests in Thailand. In the west forest group (Kaeng Krachan National Park, Salakpra Wildlife Sanctuary, Huai Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuary) there are 400-600 wild elephants. In east forest group, there are 300-400 wild elephants. For the northeast forest group (Dong Phayayen-Khao Yai Forest Complex, Phu Khiao District, Nam Nao District, Khao Yai National Park, Ta Phraya District) there are 500 – 600 wild elephants. In the south forest group (Khlong Saeng Wildlife Sanctuary) there are 100 – 150 wild elephants and in the north forest group there are 110 – 300 wilds elephants. The rest of elephants in Thailand are home raised elephants. From the information above, the situation of the number of Thai elephants is in good condition with the growth rate at 7 percent and expected to be 10 percent in the next year.

### **2. Thai elephant conservation**

Conservation of Thai elephants has been supported by the law since 1990 under the Wild Elephant Conservation Act, 1900, Wild Elephant Conservation Act, 1921, Customs Act, 1926, Exports and imports of goods into the Kingdom Act, 1979, Wildlife Conservation and Protection Act, 1992, The Ivory Act, 2015, and Draft of Elephant Act, 2017. Besides the acts, the government has also promoted elephant conservation in various ways including establishment national parks, wildlife protection zone, elephant training in the tourism business, Thai white elephant information center, Kotchasan Center, elephant hospital, artificial insemination in elephants, elephant registration etc.

### **3. The role of white elephants and King Bhumibol Adulyadej**

During the reign of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej, 21 white elephants served as the king's possession animals which Phra Sawetadulayadetphahon was the first white elephant to serve the king. Phra Sawetadulayadetphahon was a second class male white elephant in Prompong family. It was found in Krabi Province and promoted king's white elephant at The Royal Elephant Stable in Dusit Palace. It was

then moved to Klai Kangwon Palace and passed away on April 3, 2010. Besides The Royal Elephant Stable in Dusit Palace, there are server more Royal Elephant Stables in different places including National Institute of Elephant in Hangchat district, Lampang Province, Phu Phan Royal Palace, Sakon Nakhon Province, Chitralada Garden Dusit Palace, Klai Kangwon Palace, and Hua Hin District, Prachuap Khiri Khan Province where 9 Chang Samkhan (auspicious elephant) and 2 Chang Ton (elephant possession of the king) live. (Kachakorn, 2559)

#### **4. The important role of Thai Kings to elephant conservation**

King Bhumibol Adulyadej directly played the role of elephant conservation in Thailand by setting up a number of elephant conservation projects under the royal patronage to take care both auspicious elephants and ordinary elephants. The projects include an establishment of a Baby Elephant Training Center, Thai Elephant Conservation Center, and the National Institute of Elephant. White elephants also symbolize honor as they appear in many honor awards from the king given to royalties, officials, people who do outstanding good deeds. This leads to the conclusion that the role of the white elephant has become the symbol of the Thai kings to indicate the importance of the people, officials, and royalties through the honor awards given to them.

#### **5. The role of white elephants**

In present days in Thailand, white elephants have developed their roles alongside Thai society in different aspects. One aspect is that white elephants were used as a symbol in the previous version of Thai national flag in King Mongkut's reign (1804- 1868) as well as in the Thai Royal Navy flag. Moreover, elephants are also considered a great gifts to develop international relations. In 2004, King Bhumibol Adulyadej gave 2 elephants to King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden. In 1963, elephants were announced the symbol of Thailand and used as the symbol of the 13th Asian Games in 1998. In the same year, March 13 was marked the elephant day of Thailand. Besides, white elephants also appear in a more modern form such as in Thai national team logo in different kinds of sports where teams call themselves "Chang Suek" or War Elephant, Thai elephant conservation animations, elephant monuments, and elephant related arts.

Hence, the relationship between the role of the white elephants and the king has changed through time from auspicious animals served in battles to diplomatic symbol to establish and strengthen relationships with foreign countries. In contrast

with the changing role of white elephants to Thai kings, white elephants still indicate Thai identity as then are seen on flags and symbols and remain the symbol of Thailand until present days. No matter how long the times has passed, white elephants are still a symbol of Thailand as auspicious animals of the kings.

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