



# Narrating the West: King Chulalongkorn's *Klaibaan* as Literary Counter-Discourse

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## Abstract

This study examines *Klaibaan: The Writings of King Chulalongkorn* as a counter-discursive literary text that questions Western ethnographic representations of the East during the colonialist era. Concentrating on narrative procedures that subvert the traditional colonial gaze, it examines how the text defers Siam's status from an object of static viewing to a venue for dynamic interpretation and interrogation. Applying qualitative textual analysis based on post-colonial theory, notably Orientalism and counter-discourse, the study uncovers that *Klaibaan* constitutes an intellectual critique of Western morality and social deficiencies as well as a reaffirmation of Siam's intellectual independence. The text also represents a critical point in the development of Thai literary prose as it shifted from traditional modes of poetic expression to Western forms defined by cultural mediation. This article suggests that *Klaibaan* serves as an interesting instance of a historical document and work of literature which reflexively unsettles discursive centers, bringing forward Siam in the global currents of vernacular literary conversation.

## 1. Introduction

Given the European powers' expansion during the era of colonialism in Southeast Asia, it is very tempting to speculate that the Thai elite were aware of (what was seen as) increasing Western influence and threats. King Mongkut saw the Western influence creeping into Siam in terms of territorial, economic, and cultural penetration typical of colonialism. He knew only too well that Western nations often viewed Eastern peoples as backward and uncivilized, attributing their domination of other countries to their claims of superiority and progress. As Prasannam (2009, p. 148) writes, 'military might was not the sole lever at the disposal of colonial powers. The colonial discourse was worked through various social institutions to make colonial ways of thinking scientifically legitimate and to inculcate the colonial ways of thinking in the colonized population, changing the indigenous people in those colonies into 'colonized people. In so doing, colonial discourses aimed not just to dominate but to refashion the mental and cultural landscape of those it subjugated.' (Phueksom, 2003, p. 139).

During his reign, King Chulalongkorn was acutely aware of the West's patronizing attitude toward the East—both in regard to its people and its way of life. King Chulalongkorn recognized that, in the eyes of Westerners, Eastern nations were viewed as underdeveloped and backward. As he once remarked, "Although the word 'oriental' literally means 'eastern or of the East,' when it is used, it is as if the word means 'barbaric'." (Sithiphan, 1974, p. 477) This statement aligns with Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, which asserts that the West consistently portrays the East as the opposite—and inferior—Other. According to Said, Western knowledge about the East has long been constructed through travelogues and accounts of journeys to foreign lands. These texts do not merely describe but define the East in relation to the West. As Said explains,

Only an Occidental could speak of Orientals... just as it was the White Man who could designate and name the coloreds, or nonwhites." Each statement made by Orientalists or White Men "conveyed a sense of the irreducible distance separating white from colored, or Occidental from Oriental." Moreover, these statements were embedded in traditions of learning and institutional power that kept the Orientalized subject in a fixed position—as an object studied by the West—rather than as one who could speak in return. (Said, 1979, p. 228)

King Chulalongkorn's *Klaibaan* is widely recognized as an important work of travel literature in Thai literary history. Written from his personal experiences during the royal visits to Europe, the text goes beyond a simple travel record. It offers a literary space where Siam's identity is constructed and expressed in relation to Western nations, reflecting the broader dynamics of global imperialism at the time.

Western orientalist, they “produce in addition knowledge but also the reality itself.” With time, such knowledge and reality create a tradition or discourse. (Foucault, 1972) These discursive formations, entangled with structures of intellectual and state power, provided the West with a vehicle through which to “speak” its construction of the East and a stage upon which these constructions could remain dominant while indigenous voices were silenced or relegated to peripheral status. This critical observation can be used as a starting point for reading *Klaibaan* as not only responding to but also intervening in these structures of knowledge and power.

The travelogue, in this context, is a documentary form informed by the traveler's perspective. What appears in such texts is what the author perceives, evaluates and interprets. Anything out of the ordinary is commonly referred to as strange or exotic. As Jirathitikarnkit (n.d.) suggests, the knowledge that is conveyed in travel writing takes the place of otherness. When providing more detailed sketches of the countries he visited in his travel descriptions, King Chulalongkorn makes effective use of an observational technique that starkly describes aspects of Western advance. This method is consistent with Said (1993), who argues that postcolonial discourses frequently reply to imperial discourse by recoding and rewriting it from the inside. It is also an instance of what Ashcroft et al. (1989) famously name as “writing back”—a literature that resists dominant colonial discourses by which previously colonized or peripheral voices critically engage the imperial voice.

In *Klaibaan*, Western societies are depicted as unfamiliar and different, echoing the way the West once described the East. Thus, *Klaibaan* may be interpreted as a form of reverse ethnography: an exploration and evaluation of the West by an Eastern sovereign. Beyond documenting geographical, social, and cultural aspects of Western countries, King Chulalongkorn's travelogues assess and judge the West in a manner comparable to how the East was once assessed by Western writers. In sum, His Majesty's travel writings employ narrative strategies similar to those found in Western travelogues, yet do so from the vantage point of an Eastern observer describing the West.

In the field of literary studies, *Klaibaan* has also been examined as a work of travel writing. Chanhiran (2020) argues that the travel narrative reflects the King's encounters with foreign, often unfamiliar, peoples in colonial territories. His role, the study suggests, was to move Siam closer to "civilization" through the observation and recording of Western science, political systems, and culture—casting the text as a kind of literary exploration of the modern world through the eyes of a royal traveler. Another case in point is Phongpheng (2004), who studies the use of imagery and descriptive language in *Klaibaan* that uses vivid and imaginative expression to make the readers imagine both concrete and abstract senses, inducing emotional feelings.

Most scholarship on *Klaibaan* thus far has read the text in terms of history, politics, and diplomacy, framing King Chulalongkorn's royal travel writings alongside discourses of Siamese modernity and oriental engagement with the West. For example, Chutintharanon (2001) interprets the King's visit to Europe in 1897 as a symbolic speech act which confirmed Siam's equality among "civilised" nations, and Pupaka (2015) emphasises *Klaibaan*'s function of propagating modern knowledge by pointing out that it also facilitates the introduction of Western thoughts, technologies, and systems of governance to Siamese readers.

This study has certainly contributed to the understanding of the political and knowledge-exchange elements that went into *Klaibaan*, it has mostly been treated as a historical document rather than an artfully crafted piece of literature. Consequently, its narrative techniques, tropes and politics of representation have been relatively neglected. This is especially significant because *Klaibaan* partakes of the formal characteristics of Western travelogues but it assumes the perspective of an Eastern monarch—a reversal that has seldom been studied in a systematic way.

Rhetoric of counter-discourse in post-colonial theory functions as a mode of textual resistance through which colonized subjects appropriate and transform imperial forms of representation. While much has been written in the field of cultural studies about rhetoric and discourse, when applied to a colonial context, some literature - thinking directly about practices of resistance or acts that run counter to colonization - explicitly references these systematic kinds of power (Ashcroft et al., 2007). Yet the historical sovereignty of Siam as a supposedly sovereign claimant to statehood and the convoluted infrastructure of its colonized subjectivity make a mess of this framework, configuring it such that one might question whether or how counter-discursive practices have functioned outside of the amorphous axis of decolonizer-decolonizee. Studies on Southeast Asian engagements with colonial discourse, including Prasannam's (2009) reading of *The Siam*

Renaissance, have helped to reveal how the region navigates the relationship between modernity and identity, but have paid little attention to royal travel writing as discursive resistance.

*Klaibaan* is also underrepresented in broader international travel-writing research: it is discussed in a relatively small number of literary studies. The text has not yet been studied in depth as “reverse ethnography” in that it presents the West as the observed “Other.” While the theoretical tools that Said developed in *Orientalism* (1979) and other critical exposures of colonial representation form a firm ground for these contours, few scholars press such analyses upon *Klaibaan* with consistency. Without this viewpoint, there remains a lack of knowledge about how non-colonized Eastern intellectuals appropriated Western literary forms to establish independence and authority in the intellectual and cultural domains.

This study attempts to fill that gap by locating *Klaibaan* in global travel writing as well as within the postcolonial discourse of counter-representation. By its foregrounding of narrative devices such as thematic contraries, ironic reversals, and tonal shifts, the analysis reads *Klaibaan* not only as a chronicle of events but also as an intervention that is intended to disrupt Western liberal constructs about civilization, culture, progress (assimilation), and agency (the capacity to observe records in textuality) on both conceptual and practical level.

## **2. Objectives of the Study**

This study aims to explore *Klaibaan* by King Chulalongkorn as a literary work that functions as a counter-discourse to Western ethnographic writings about the East. Specifically, it seeks to examine how His Majesty employs the content and narrative strategies to represent Western societies from an Eastern perspective, investigate the engagement of *Klaibaan* with key post-colonial concepts—particularly *Orientalism*—and contextualize the work within the broader development of Thai literary prose and the global tradition of travel writing. These objectives together support the argument that *Klaibaan* is not merely a historical travel account, but a strategic literary intervention in the cultural politics of its time.

## **3. Theoretical Framework**

The study is informed by post-colonial thinking, including the idea of *Orientalism* associated with Said (1979). Said argues that Western cultures have constructed and propagated myths for the East, depicting it as extremely different and very exotic. Additionally, through hegemony,

Western powers represented Eastern societies in a way that saw their inferiority to the occident. Such representations are not simply misrepresentations; they are part of a general system of knowledge that justifies and maintains the colonial order. In this sense, Orientalism is not just a way of seeing; it is a discourse: a particular manner of organizing knowledge that privileges the West and relegates non-Western cultures to second-class status.

In a more detailed analysis of the text, the study also refers to Ashcroft et al.'s (1989) understanding of counter-discourse. This is a notion that refers to the processes through which writers and intellectuals from colonized or non-Western societies might address themselves to dominant Western narratives, not only by opposing them head-on but also by transforming or reorienting them from within. Such a conceptual framework is especially well-suited for the analysis of *Klaibaan* because Siam, though never colonized, was profoundly implicated in the colonial discourses of its time. The work takes after the fashion of Western travel pieces, providing a reflective and critical narrator from a Siamese point of view.

Furthermore, the research also draws on Foucault's (1972) conceptualisation of discourse as a historically situated system that determines what can be known, thought, and spoken. Through this lens, the analysis is able to read *Klaibaan* not only as a travelogue but also as a discursive intervention – one that creates knowledge and enters into power relations. Travel becomes the arena in which Siam constructs its modern self and negotiates its place within a world informed by Western impact.

Method-wise, for this purpose, the analysis is applied from a content as well as a formal literary perspective. Reading *Klaibaan* closely is to read it not just for what it says but also how. The focus is on narrative tricks including first-person viewpoint, description and reflection, comparisons East-West and variations in tone — from admiration to criticism. These are seen as gimmicks, literary tricks that permit the text to generate meaning and position the author as an observing soul who is thoughtful enough to interpret and judge.

While the theoretical foundation of this study lies primarily in post-colonial theory, it also incorporates literary theory to emphasize the active role of literature in shaping cultural understanding. Literature is not treated as a passive reflection of reality, but as a medium through which ideas such as modernity, national identity, and cultural difference are created and conveyed. By integrating literary analysis with post-colonial theory, this study positions *Klaibaan* as both a literary work and a political statement—one that challenges Eurocentric views and affirms Siam's intellectual and cultural agency within the colonial world.

#### 4. Narrating the West: King Chulalongkorn's *Klaibaan* as Literary Counter-Discourse

It is believed that the reason behind King Chulalongkorn's repeated journeys to the West, especially his first journey to Europe in 1897, is that he would have liked to witness Western civilization with his own eyes and adopt their knowledge to develop his country to become more compatible with them. However, at the same time, his visits to the leading and powerful European countries offers a great opportunity for His Majesty himself to demonstrate or present our country's civilization. As explained by Chutintharanon (2001, p. 195), the meaning behind King Chulalongkorn's journey to Europe lies not only in what he sought to learn, but also in what he sought to show.

King Chulalongkorn's attempt is to gain his ground among the statespersons and religious leaders of those powerful European countries on the basis of equality as the leader of a free nation that is as "civilized" as other civilized countries in the West.

Therefore, King Chulalongkorn's journeys to Europe were a demonstration of the country's civilization. By himself, he aimed to "create the first impression" of Thailand among Western countries by exhibiting the country's "exquisiteness" via diplomatic ceremonial and protocols, interaction with leaders of European countries, display of royal attire, his vassals and the royal procession. (Chutintharanon, 2001, p. 195)

Considering His Majesty's travelogues, it is rather obvious that providing an accurate and proper knowledge about the West to Thai people to sustain the country's stability is not the sole purpose of his works. During the reign of King Chulalongkorn, his majesty produced some records about foreigners and foreign countries. They are travelogues rendering his visits to foreign countries. In this case, it can be said that the information in King Chulalongkorn's travelogues is modernly portrayed. (Pupaka, 2015, p. 32)

His Majesty employs a similar style of writing used in Western travelogues in which the East is described through the eyes of Western travellers. As a result, they serve as tools to organize and refine the knowledge about the West through the eyes of an Eastern traveller. Moreover, the travelogues possessed the characteristics of occidentalism and can be considered the counter- discourse of Western ethnographic writings about the East.

Within post-colonial theory, the concept of counter-discourse refers to the ways in which dominant or imperial narratives are challenged and subverted—often through the rewriting or

re-inscription of canonical texts. Such resistance typically emerges from the margins or periphery, while remaining aware of the powerful ability of imperial and neo-imperial discourses to absorb or neutralize that resistance (Ashcroft et al., 2007, p. 50). One such site of this discursive battle is ethnographic writing. Under colonial conditions, ethnography tended to represent non-European cultures as either exotic or primitive ordered in an evolutionary hierarchy that naturalized Western dominance. These representations were consistent with the ideological objectives of colonialism that compared cultures hierarchically, and thus justified imperial rule (Ashcroft et al., 2007, p. 79).

In terms of the sources in *Klaibaan*, King Chulalongkorn shows a complex appreciation of Western culture which is recognized as both strong and flawed. On the other hand he feels unalloyed admiration for the West's well-established cultural legacy and technological development, adding that "innovations have enriched human life, improved public health, and stimulated education & governance". On the other hand, his own experiences indicate that all aspects of Western culture was not so advanced or civilized as is often depicted for Eastern ears (Chulalongkorn, His Majesty King, 2002b, pp. 328–331). Through his narrative, he contests the colonial representation of the East as primitive or savage by claiming that Eastern countries have intellectual capability and can move forward in a way distinct from that of any other nation.

King Chulalongkorn suggests that the advancement of the West is the result of perseverance, activeness and eagerness in seeking knowledge, which are the unique personality traits shared among Westerners, as noted in *Klaibaan*:

Considering both favourable and unfavourable features of those countries, I am amazed at the perseverance and dedication of their people. They are not discouraged with the adverse geographical conditions of their countries. On the contrary, they only look at the positive and beneficial parts of those unfriendly conditions. Not only that they have never given up, but they also find a way to turn their unfriendly lands into the lands of great profit and prosperity. (Chulalongkorn, His Majesty King, 2002a, pp. 222-223)

According to the quote, His Majesty expressed his admiration for the determination and perseverance of Westerners. They put a conscious effort to develop their countries despite any discouraging difficulties they have to endure. For example, France, Germany, Switzerland and Italy have suffered from the difficulty in transportation caused by the countries' mountainous terrain.

However, they dug tunnels through the mountains and complete the nationwide network of railroads facilitating the transportation of their people and overcoming the problem posed by the geographical disadvantage. Norway, on the other hand, has suffered from severe coldness and lack of light even in the daytime, but rather than being daunted, local people managed to live there without problems. These examples clearly demonstrate the perseverance of Westerners to develop their countries.

However, His Majesty explains that when he had an opportunity to observe the West in person, it became clear to him that the West is not thoroughly civilized and that certain aspects of its reality—those not typically displayed to outsiders—reveal signs of social and moral decline. The details are as follows:

#### 4.1 Civilization

In the viewpoint of Eastern people, Western countries have always been prosperous and civilized since ancient times. King Chulalongkorn agreed with the fact that the West has been prosperous for a long time but disagreed with the idea that it has always been that way. He suggests that Western civilization has constantly changed for better or worse through its long history. There were times when people enjoyed prosperity, while at other times they suffered from the decline of the society they lived in as noted in *Klaibaan*:

Rome is an ancient city with 2,000 years of age. The highest point of prosperity it once enjoyed had long passed before it went down to its lowest period in the history. Afterward still, it has gradually returned to life adding another phase in its long history. (Chulalongkorn, His Majesty King, 2002c, p. 230)

As mentioned in *Klaibaan*, King Chulalongkorn compared the cycle of prosperity and declines of Italian society with its architecture from three different periods of time. “The oldest age of Italian society can be compared to the Roman Colosseum, one of the greatest amphitheatres with a capacity of 80,000. Its middle period can be compared to St. Peter’s Basilica, built according to the order of the Pope. The building is too grand to be rebuilt in the modern age since it would require a great deal of fortune and too high the skill people in this era to achieve. The modern period is Italy at the present time with Rome as its capital city.” (Chulalongkorn, His Majesty King, 2002c, p. 232) He also points out that although various tools are available to facilitate construction in modern times, the artistic skills of modern craftsmen can hardly be compared to those in the past.

King Chulalongkorn believes that Italian society is in a phase of decline. He suggests that its decline is similar to Ceylonese society whose prosperity has declined so much that it cannot be compared to its ancient luxury as noted in *Klaibaan*.

In terms of the population, Italians are the descendants of the Romans whose physical skills and intellect are widely renowned. However, neither the skills nor perseverance of Italians can be compared to those of their ancestors. This similar thought once occurred to me when I thought of Ceylon. It is obvious that the Ceylonese we see these days are drastically different from the descriptions in the book *Mahawong*. Bahari people these days must be completely different from their ancestors as well. When the society reaches the top of its prosperity, it inevitably declines until hitting the bottom as an English term “degenerate” suggests. When the society lost its fortune, even the language lost its identity and transforms into a new one. (Chulalongkorn, His Majesty King, 2002c, p. 232)

As stated in *Klaibaan*, King Chulalongkorn chooses the countries that are widely known for their high civilization and prosperity as examples to emphasise that even for those countries the state of decline is inevitable.

King Chulalongkorn's *Klaibaan* can be read as a subtle yet potent counter-discourse against the dominant narrative of “Western civilization” constructed during the colonial era to justify the West's claim to civilizational supremacy. As Edward Said argues in *Orientalism*, the West often defined itself as the embodiment of reason, modernity, and progress, while relegating the East to a position of backwardness and inferiority. In contrast, King Chulalongkorn's narrative offers an alternative voice—one that critiques rather than mirrors the West's self-image.

Rather than denying Western prosperity or technological advancement outright, King Chulalongkorn reframes “civilization” not as a static or linear achievement but as a historical process marked by cycles of rise and decline. His comparisons—such as the architectural evolution of Rome or the decline of Ceylon as a Buddhist center—served to relativize the West, presenting it not as a civilizational apex but as one among many that are subject to temporal decay. His narrative is thus more than a record of observation; it becomes a discursive intervention into the very concept of civilization. Against the linear teleology of Western modernity, he offers a vision of civilization as relational and cyclical, undermining the ideological foundations of Eurocentric civilizational ideals.

Drawing from Michel Foucault's theory of discourse and power/knowledge (Foucault, 1972), one can view the King's writing as a strategic entry into the field of knowledge production. By articulating a critique of Western civilization from the positionality of a sovereign non-Western ruler, *Klaibaan* challenges the epistemic monopoly of the West. It produces an alternative knowledge that refuses to be confined by colonial definitions, asserting Siam's intellectual agency in narrating not only itself but the West as well.

#### 4.2 Lifestyle

Regarding Western lifestyle, King Chulalongkorn discusses the way Westerners dress in their daily life and explains that Westerners are not always dressed elegantly as they are seen in Siam as noted in *Klaibaan*:

Judging solely from stories they tell, it is impossible to think of Westerners as anything but luxurious nobles. However, in fact, they are dressed smartly when they travel to other countries because they are merchants. Local people are not dressed like that. Only a shirt and a pair of trousers are common for them. Some wear a waistcoat over their shirt, some wear a jacket without a waistcoat, but they certainly do not usually wear a cravat. The shirt is usually left outside the trousers... People, both men and women, are dressed mainly to protect themselves from weather just like the working class in our country, but only because it is hot in our country, so sometimes, we do not even wear a shirt. If it were hot in Western countries, people would wear fewer pieces of clothes than they do. When Thai people visit these countries, they usually stay in the capital city and talk only about the good side of both people and places. No one mentions anything bad, so the countries sound more luxurious than they are. (Chulalongkorn, His Majesty King, 2002c, p. 166)

According to *Klaibaan*, King Chulalongkorn demonstrates that Westerners that he saw when he visited Europe were not as exquisite and elegant as Thai people believed. In real life, Western people were not always dressed up the way they were when they travelled to other countries with the aim to show off their civilization. His Majesty compares the way Westerners were dressed in their daily life with the way Chinese labour in Thailand does. They dressed just to protect themselves from the surroundings, and the fact that they dress differently from people in Thailand was entirely the result of different weather conditions. It does not indicate that Western clothing is more civilized than ours.

It is obvious that His Majesty would like to emphasise that Western lifestyle did not always reflect their superiority over others. Sometimes, lifestyle is a result of the necessity in life, especially the activities that are practiced by everyone regardless of which social class they belong to, according to *Klaibaan*.

In *Klaibaan*, King Chulalongkorn's portrayal of Western life was more than a simple observational fact and serves to undermine the perceived superiority of the West as a narrative tool. The King does so by literary contrasts, textual framing and subtle ironic tonality, which help shift lifestyle from the index of civilizational brilliance to a result of environmental imperatives and social milieus.

The representation of Western clothing, for example, was based on a consistent contrast between outward elegance and everyday reality. Where Thai imaginations project Europeans as having always put together clothing styles—as something that shares kinship with modernity—the King does not agree, and instead speculated it was a dressing up of climate rather than culture that was going on. This formal opposition serves as a demythologizing narratological trope, demonstrating the mediation of ideas of civilization through elite interactions and visions. (His Majesty King Chulalongkorn, 2002c, p. 166).

Likewise, the passage about public parks functions not just as a setting but as a symbolic commentary on architectural and spatial variance. Western parks, as opposed to literally exclusive aristocratic pleasure gardens, become themselves health-inducing needs born from the stifled, crowded confines of European households. The Thai home, on the other hand, is free-flowing and harmonious with nature. By way of this equivalency, the King re-arranged the status of space and habit and demonstrated that in one context what seems “progressive” might actually be nothing more than a makeshift solution to structural malaise. (Chulalongkorn, His Majesty King, 2002a, p. 175)

Even his discussion of alcohol—addressing Western utilitarian drinking versus Thai symbolic drinking—is part of this larger textual strategy: the substitution of explanatory contexts for civilizational judgments. The implication here is obvious: lifestyle does not affirm superiority but adaptation. (Chulalongkorn, His Majesty King, 2002a, p. 174)

In *Klaibaan*, King Chulalongkorn adopts a layered narrative voice—observant yet restrained, critical without antagonism. Rather than idealizing the West, he presents it as ordinary and culturally specific, not as a universal model. For example, his reflections on European habits—such as cleanliness, punctuality, and etiquette—are not merely descriptive but comparative. He evaluates them against Siamese practices, sometimes questioning their rigidity or excess. This strategy reflects a form of cultural relativism that challenges the Orientalist view, as described by Said (1979), which

frames the West as inherently superior. Following Foucault's (1972) theory of discourse, which sees writing as a means of shaping what can be known or valued, *Klaibaan* becomes more than a travelogue. It is a discursive intervention—one that repositions Siam as a reflective and discerning participant in defining modernity.

#### 4.3 Religion

In the travelogues, King Chulalongkorn discusses religious practices and beliefs of European countries. He explains that despite the opinion of Western people that Buddhism relies mostly on rituals and worships statues, Christianity, a major Western religion, also worships statues and practices so many rituals that, in his opinion, resemble the practices of Brahmanism. (Chulalongkorn, His Majesty King, 2002c, p. 83) His Majesty believes Eastern people adhere more strictly to morality than Western people and do not carelessly judge other beliefs because they are different. For example, His Majesty explains that Westerners bought a Buddha image as evidence of the Otherness of the East. When he was in Europe, he also bought a statue of Christian sacred beings because it was something he had never seen before—not as evidence of their difference (Chulalongkorn, His Majesty King, 2002c, p. 83) as noted in *Klaibaan*.

Around the neighbourhood of a church, they are shops selling different styles of Jesus Christ and Madonna images—the same way Buddha images are sold around Wat Samphuem. Foreigners bought a Buddha image for their pleasure or to emphasise that we, Buddhists, are idolaters. During my journey to the West, I, then, bought an image of their sacred beings as something that I have never seen, not as evidence of their idolatry. (Chulalongkorn, His Majesty King, 2002c, p. 83)

In addition, King Chulalongkorn points out that one of the weaknesses of Catholicism is the act of expiation. He explains that it is not rational to think that no matter what bad deed you have done, it can be cancelled by the act of expiation. He suggests that it is not the way to prevent people from doing bad deeds. Moreover, in the end, the practice has been turned into a business. (Chulalongkorn, His Majesty King, 2002c, p. 84)

In *Klaibaan*, King Chulalongkorn discusses religion not just as a matter of belief, but as a way to reflect on how the West defines what counts as “civilized.” He does not compare Buddhism and Christianity to claim one is superior to the other. Instead, he highlights religious differences to show that both East and West have their own beliefs, rituals, and sacred images—and that these should not be used to judge one culture as more advanced than another.

King Chulalongkorn points out a clear contradiction. While some Westerners criticize Buddhism as “idol-worship,” Catholicism itself employs images and rituals, including statues of the Virgin Mary and Jesus. He does not attack this practice head on, but argues that both religions have sacred objects and it is hypocritical for one religion to condemn the other for a practice they themselves are utilizing. This mild but effective irony works as the literary counterpoint, showing the double standard for evaluating religious practice. He also draws attention to the way religious images are sold just as Buddha images are sold outside Thai temples, Christian icons are sold near churches in Europe. This parallel serves as a literary device to show that what some Westerners label as “strange” or “superstitious” is, in fact, something they also do in their own way.

#### **4.4 Art and culture**

In *Klaibaan*, King Chulalongkorn suggests that Western opera is basically similar to Thai traditional theatre with differences only in details.

In fact, Western theatre is not exactly different from ours. For example, the Grand Opera is about singing and dancing without dialogues during the performance... Therefore, when Westerners comment that our performances look funny or even ugly, we can say the same thing back at them. In the eyes of Thai people to judge their performances, Western dancing is unappealing and embarrassing to look at. Female performers wear short skirts, pulling it high while jumping around like some monkeys. It is embarrassing for women to have to perform that way. In terms of the stories and music, they are not different from ours. The only difference is the instruments used for the performance. On our part, we have to stick rigidly to the rules and cannot alter them even one bit. Similarly, Thai dancing needs to follow different sets of rules. If altered, it will be considered unacceptable. Thai theatre pays great attention to the precision of music and dances. On the other hand, Western theatre is more flexible. New music and dancing styles can be created as they see fit. Music can be soft and slow, or loud and fast, or even something in between. Composers can create any kinds of music as they desire as long as it sounds good to their ears. Similarly, they can dance the way they like as long as it goes well with the music... Western theatre is different from ours just because we belong to different cultures, practice different styles of art, and adhere different rules. (Chulalongkorn, His Majesty King, 2002c, pp. 80-81)

As noted in *Klaibaan*, His Majesty points out that the differences between Western theatre and Thai traditional theatre lie in the different types of musical instruments and dancing styles. For Thai theatre, both music and dancing have to be performed precisely according to the rules. For Western theatre, on the other hand, there are no absolute rules. Both music and dancing styles can be altered. Moreover, he suggests that Western countries and Thailand have their own unique traits and belong to different cultures. Therefore, it is not surprising when Westerners find Thai performances unappealing and laughable, and when Thai people feel the same way toward Western theatre.

In *Klaibaan*, King Chulalongkorn approaches art as not just a form of entertainment or national show but a cultural expression born of social hierarchies, aesthetic tastes, and contending values. Rather than simply valuing one theatrical style over the other, he juxtaposes Western and Thai theater arts to point out that differences in how performances are staged do not result from a difference in “civilization,” but from dissimilar artistic traditions and cultural logics.

The passage is organised by a series of contrasts between Western opera and Thai traditional theatre. The King observes that both modes depend on music and movement to narrate tales, the one via opera, the other by way of dance-drama. This contrast serves as a kind of subdued metadiscursivity: by citing the unfamiliar on grounds that are structurally akin to those of the familiar, the King problematizes his subjects’ belief in Western aesthetic forms as inherently superior or more advanced.

One of the important rhetorical devices here is mild irony. Western onlookers may find Thai performance odd, even amusing; but the King reverses the gaze and encourages Thais to see Western dance—with its short skirts and jumping around—as awkward and unrefined. This reversal is not simply funny: it serves as a discursive leveler, asking the reader to reconsider who gets to define beauty or elegance or shame across societies.

Farther down, His Majesty ponders structure and freedom in art. Thai theatre requires precision, he says, and is constrained by formal rules; Western drama allows room for improvisation and refashioning. He does not argue that one would be better than the other, but he only sees both as a reflection of each civilization's mentality. In the process, he breaks down and dismantles the notion that flexibility means progress, that rigidity means backwardness. Both are expressions of divergent artistic traditions, not stations on some civilizational stair.

In this juxtaposition of pleximetry techniques, *Klaibaan* maps out a field for intercultural dialogue—not the happy-clappy kind that one might call “assimilation,” but as critical comparison.

Again, King Chulalongkorn would have his reader reflect that what is natural and uncultivated in one place, is not so in another; but strange and ridiculous: as also how habits and fashions of judging are nothing more than custom, not any essence.

Eventually, the topic of art and culture in *Klaibaan* transcends national identity. It is a fictional apparatus to get King Chulalongkorn to question aesthetic hegemony and propose a more pluralistic model of culture. He demonstrates that “taste” is not universal—it’s local, contextual and inflected by historical experience and cultural values and systems of knowledge. In so doing, *Klaibaan* not only enjoys Western art; it relocates Siamese aesthetics as being able to judge, discern and creatively interpret in a global context.

#### **4.5 Innovation and technology**

Although His Majesty keeps records on the advancement and innovation of European countries throughout the journeys, he comments that their modern civilization still cannot be compared to their prosperity in ancient times as noted in *Klaibaan*.

Apart from steam power and electricity, which are discovered only recently, modern craftsmanship has nothing to compare to the skills of craftsmen during the middle period. The only advantage they have these days is that with the help of steam power and electricity, they can reproduce what have been done in the past easily and quickly. As a result, those that require sheer skills to create become widespread. Things become bigger and grander, but it cannot be said that they are better than the old ones because people believe that those created with creativity and conscious effort are more admirable and worth respecting than those created with ease. Therefore, the price for handmade and machine-made objects cannot be compared. (Chulalongkorn, His Majesty King, 2002c, p. 231)

The modern period is the present Italy, marked by the time when Rome became the official capital city of the country. The construction system has been evolved greatly, but there is hardly anything special about the products from the changes. The structures look standard and similar to those you can see everywhere in the world. (Chulalongkorn, His Majesty King, 2002c, p. 231)

It can be said that King Chulalongkorn tries to explain to Thai people about the concept of civilization. He tries to make it clear to his audience that the civilization does not prevail forever. When the civilization reaches its peak, it eventually declines. His Majesty might aim to remind the reader not to focus only on the prosperous side of Western countries and take it for granted that everything in the West is civilized.

According to Said's concept of *Orientalism* (1979), the journey from Europe to Asia is framed as a movement from the center of civilization to the undeveloped periphery—a spatial and ideological construction that positions the West as superior and the East as subordinate. The way Western travellers describe and record what they have seen during their journeys to the East make the East an exotic place and is judged as “otherness”. Furthermore, the details in their travelogues become the default representatives of the whole Eastern world. (Jirathitikarnkit, n.d.)

From the same perspective, the journey from Bangkok to Europe can be considered the journey from the border to the very centre of the power and civilization of the era. As mentioned earlier, in *Klaibaan*, His Majesty has recorded the knowledge about the West in the modern way. His Majesty not only presents the strengths and advantages of the West but also points out the weaknesses he perceived during the journeys. Considering the thorough descriptions about the West, it is obvious that His Majesty had learned about the West even before embarking on his journey. As a result, King Chulalongkorn's writings are not mere records of what he witnessed during his journeys, but rather reflections of a well-informed understanding of the West—an understanding cultivated through prior study and intellectual preparation. This is evident in his reference to John Holland Rose's *The Development of the European Nations*, (Rose, 1915) which demonstrates that his commentary was not based solely on firsthand impressions but was also shaped by historical readings and broader interpretive frameworks. (Chulalongkorn, His Majesty King, 2002a, p. 104)

In the last record of his journey, His Majesty straightforwardly expresses his viewpoint about European countries:

I have been asked frequently how Europe is. The answer to this question is relative and can be varied from person to person depending on which perspective the person looks at the continent. As for me,

I look at Europe from a rather general viewpoint seeing it as a piece of land where there is nothing left to be proud of. Every bit of fertile land has been utilized and developed to its fullest capacity. Those that are left are pieces of lands useless for cultivation... The land has reached its limit and hardly is able to be developed into anything better... On the other hand, I am amazed at the knowledge and creativity of European people continuing to develop new ideas and inventions to facilitate their living. For 6,000 years, people have learned to make use of natural resources. There were times when human culture was stuck and regressed, but it eventually regained the momentum and moved forward again. At present, the knowledge is blooming and even multiplying from what we had at the beginning of our race. People have learned to make use of more and more outrageous things. For example, we learned about steam power and have used it for different purposes. Now, we have electricity which helps create an even easier life for people. However, no one can predict how much electricity is left for us to use in the future or whether there is any harm from using it this much. Or maybe someday in the future people will come up with something even better than electricity... In brief, there is nothing worth mentioning left in physical features of Europe, but for knowledge, it is growing and leaping forward so greatly that it is difficult to catch up. (Chulalongkorn, His Majesty King, 2002c, pp. 328-331)

According to the excerpt, King Chulalongkorn suggests that Western people have developed and utilized their land and other physical resources until they have reached their limit. No matter what development, maintenance, and cultivation methods they might introduce, the land cannot be any better than its present state. On the other hand, he admires the intelligence and knowledge of Western people. With perseverance and determination, Westerners keep introducing new technologies and inventions that are greatly beneficial for human life. His Majesty's knowledge and understanding about Europe is also clear in the conclusion of the records of his journeys.

In the *Klaibaan*, King Chulalongkorn questions the presupposition that modern technology equals civilisation. This narrative gesture conforms to Said's (1979) notion of Orientalism, where the West necessarily constructs itself as progressive and rational and not backward and stultified like the East. King Chulalongkorn undermines that binary, not as a mimic but as a critic. His testimonial is a form of discursive resistance—an intervention in the discourses through which understanding of reality is constructed". Instead of being a mere spectator of the West, *Klaibaan* engages in a rethinking of the terms through which modernity and civilization are formulated. He loves innovations such as steam power and electricity, but he insists that they cannot properly replace the creativity

and skill of yore. Machines can make things faster and bigger but, perhaps not better. This contradiction undermines the precept that everything new is best.

King Chulalongkorn also presents European cities such as Florence and Venice not as paragons, but sites of glory and decay. He demonstrates that even the West has its cycles and no civilization lasts forever at its zenith. This view is in contrast to the Western-based notion of unending progress.

*Klaibaan* presents a reversed gaze that challenges Orientalist Western history as exotic or developing. King Chulalongkorn is looking throughout the West—seeing, comparing, critiquing in his wise discernment. This is a straightforward example of counter-discourse, in that it involves engagement and goes beyond simply learning to reflecting back. His Majesty is indicating that civilization is not defined in terms of machines or material progress alone, but also on the basis of values, creativity and cultural equilibrium. The writing thus becomes an intellectual gesture. *Klaibaan* is not simply a travelogue, but an assertion of Siam's position as synthesizer, assessor, and discursive respondent – a voice from the East that thinks the unthinkable, compares it critically with what falls uneasily in place across Western latitudes.

## 5. Narrative Strategies and the Discursive Construction of the Self in *Klaibaan*

In literary terms, *Klaibaan* is not just a non-fiction travelogue, but rather a story that presents conscious narrative practices during the gaining of discursive power. As narrated in the first-person, the story allows King Chulalongkorn to be an observer and judge as well. His accounts have the force of experience behind them, and his writing not only describes but also analyzes, granting a kind of epistemic authority to the worlds through which he takes the reader. This contributes to His Majesty's profile as an intellectual comparatist impresario, a source of reflection and guidance about meaning, literally perhaps the sovereign on the move in conversation with himself.

The forward movement of the story conforms to a mode of travel writing in its surface features—ordering, details, descriptive episodes—but it often veers away from on-the-road accounts. King Chulalongkorn breaks up straightforward observations with multiple layers of commentary, self-reflective asides and rhetorical questions. This alternating of description and interpretation results in a lively rhythm of narration that provokes readers to look and not just “see” the West but also (re-)consider what it means from Siam's angle. Travel becomes a text-space of contemplation, judgment and cultural placement.

One of the prevalent techniques in *Klaibaan* is binary opposition. Facts are frequently opposed to one another as one develops these contrasting pairs, such as East and West, civilization and barbarism, outer form brigaded against inner substance. These binaries are not displayed in a form of direct contrast but rooted in something beautiful (our Western technology, public order

or artistic achievement), which is gradually transformed into critique, recontextualization or ironic distance. This rhetorical choice not only interrogates Western cultural hegemony but also encourages the Siamese readership to share a comparative viewpoint. The story is not a case of “imitation of the West,” rather, it resorts to the Western model as a discursive mirror in which to reflect and re-figure Siam’s own modern self.

Tone and voice are also important. The voice of the narrator ranges from sincere contemplation, evaluative distance and undertoned irony—often when shedding light on contradictory aspects of Western civilization. This tonal layering extends the narrative depth and marks the narrator’s intellectual investment. It also keeps the reader from passively absorbing the text, for how we interpret it changes with each shift in tone, thus cutting us off from just happily basking in ever-more-disturbing ruminations.

From a literary discourse point of view, the text may be considered as an integral element in a larger discursive strategy that challenges hegemonic Western appropriations of the East. In Foucault’s (1972) terms, writing does not serve the purpose of representing, but constitutes and organizes the real as a mass of knowledge that can be apprehended, known and said at any specific historical moment. In so doing, *Klaibaan* is more than a travelogue—it is an act of discursive intervention which reconceptualises Siam’s place in the world order of knowledge. By writing the West mediated through Siamese eyes, the text disrupts this one-way knowledge flow and reasserts Siam’s ability to see, compare, and interpret.

This reversal of the usual Western-philosophy-to-East-supported epistemic flow echoes Edward Said’s conception of Orientalism, around which is elucidated creation by the West throughout the history of the East as its cultural and epistemological Other. In *Orientalism*, Said (1979) demonstrates how various forms of travel writing, scholarship and other textual practices generated a regime of knowledge that both essentialised and subordinated Eastern societies. *Klaibaan*, however, can be interpreted as a nuanced counter-narrative to that dissymmetry. In adopting this kind of a self-reflexive mode, first-person and overtly didactic in character, King Chulalongkorn places himself – and through him Siam – not as object for the Western gaze but as a subjective observer capable of assessing Western civilization according to its own standards. Its consequence is an inversion of the colonial gaze. Such an act not only robs Western discourse of its authority but also reasserts the intellectual sovereignty of Siam. Travel, then, is itself a kind of textual agency—one that places *Klaibaan* more firmly within the longer arc of global literary history. Reading this inter-textual and ideological intervention sheds light on the fact that *Klaibaan* is not just a “local” travel text ; it is a work of an intervention in world literature. It provides a strategically placed counter-gaze from the margins—self-conscious, intellectually armed, and able to reframe the terms in which civilizations are compared and treated.

In addition, travelling in *Klaibaan* is a way of self-fashioning. The visit to Europe is no longer about exploration; rather, it becomes a process through which Siam is constructed vis-à-vis the West. Yet depictions of the city, social life, technology, and aesthetics in Europe are not portrayed merely for interest's sake: they provide benchmarks that were used by Siamese elites to measure and contest their own modernity and values as cultural possibilities. Thus, the story can be seen in the context of the overall enterprise to express these elements of Siam's intellectual independence and modern self-image within a climate heavily influenced by imperialism.

## 6. Conclusion

King Chulalongkorn's *Klaibaan* is a response to and counter-discourse against the Western colonial process. Western travelers reported on the East during the colonial era, and this writing often portrayed the East as exotic and substandard, requiring Western hegemony. *Klaibann*, instead, is an inversion of this flow of representation. Thus, from the vantage point of an Eastern ruler, it presents a view in which the West is in turn observed, judged by, and interpreted through his royal eyes. It is the counter-discursivity, on the narrative structure as well as the tonality of that by which we affirm such ideas. It is this kind of work that King Chulalongkorn takes on in the Western literary form of the travelogue, but what he gives expression to is a different sort of knowing—one grounded in Eastern logic, cultural comprehension, and critical thought. He is not writing to imitate the West, but to scrutinize it with respect and discernment. It also writes up the strengths and weaknesses of Western society, giving a more even-handed image that will hopefully allow readers to view the West as not being an unattainable model but being a complex, limited human society. This text is also a way of producing knowledge. In Michel Foucault's theory of discourse (Foucault, 1972), in each age, it writes "truth." *Klaibaan* adds to the process by providing the counter voice of Siam, not the center of colonisation. By comparing, criticizing, and contemplating, King Chulalongkorn seeks alternative forms of thinking about the West and Siam's place in this new world. His writing helps redraw the map of East and West by demonstrating that Siam possesses the capacity to comprehend, analyze and spew back.

From a literary standpoint, *Klaibaan* is also an important milestone in the history of modern Thai prose. It melds factual observation with interpretation, cultural comparison, and identity-formation. Travel becomes a space of reflection on the self, and to locate Siam as a nation that can interact with the world, not just submit passively, but act actively and intelligently.

In summary, *Klaibaan* serves as a counter-discourse that provides an alternative perspective, saying no to the monopoly of Western discourse and having Siam's voice in the global dialogue. It is a literary document as well as a historical one that speaks across time about the power of observation, language, and representation.

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