In *Contested Nationalism and the 1932 Overthrow of the Absolute Monarchy in Siam*, Matthew Copeland challenges Thailand’s royalist historiography by demonstrating that various forms of nationalism arose in Thailand independent of, and in opposition, to the Jakkri dynasty. Utilizing a wide range of vernacular newspapers, Copeland shows that nationalism in Thailand was the result of “an ongoing process of discursive struggle” in popular print material and was not simply a gift “set in place” by the Siamese monarchy. This allows Copeland to challenge the general notion that the subjects of Siam had no role in their own modernization or national development which in effect “right-sizes” the role of popular, if elite, participation.

After chapter one’s brief introduction which outlines the main aspects of the commonly held royalist version of Siam’s history and some minor attempts to challenge the same, Copeland begins to deconstruct myths surrounding late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Siam one by one. In chapter 2, “Print Journalism and the Matter of Siamese Unity,” Copeland demonstrates that despite royal attempts to monopolize power and control early print matter, journalist from elite backgrounds, often Europeans or Siamese with European educations, were able to push back particularly through the printed word. In particular, the chapter shows that the efforts of Chulalongkorn and Vajiravudh (Rama V and VI) to create a sense of “unity” (samakkhi) in the nation of Siam were met with a complex set of journalistic reactions that often demonstrated the disunity of the Siamese people. Journalists used examples of large Chinese populations, early ideas of class distinctions, and the hierarchical relationship of royal and subject to
reveal the fractured and contentious nature of the population and created a more “multi-vocal” sense of nation.

These early reactions in the press were a direct challenge to royal authority and ideology. Despite the monarchy’s initial inclinations toward clamping down on the press, issues of extraterritoriality and limited governmental organization restricted the reach of Jakkri power. Instead, as Copeland demonstrates in chapter three, “Contested Nationalism in the Sixth Reign,” King Vajiravudh began to submit essays and opinion articles to many area papers in Bangkok in an attempt to sway elites and the literati. Despite being seen as the “founder” of the “modern Thai nation,” Vajiravudh’s articles often come across as elitist, anti-Chinese, and filled with a sense of royal “Thai” superiority that offended a large portion of his stated audience. His articles received negative response from many journalists and elites that saw the king’s attempts as a bald endeavor to support the monarchy perhaps at the expense of the newly forming Siamese “people.”

These journalistic responses to Vajiravudh’s writings were part of a bourgeoning political movement that Copeland examines in chapter four, “Political Journalism.” These new political journalists, beginning in 1917, to create what Copeland says can only “rightly be described as a nascent Thai ‘independence movement’” These political journalists took bold steps in creating their own national definitions and even came to depict “the authority of the ‘people’” as standing in direct opposition to the government “which was increasingly represented in ‘enemy-oppressor’ terms.” This new “singular nationalist project” embraced questions of labor, race, and independence while shifting the monarchy’s “claim to prominence” to a marginal position.
But it was not merely sharp words and well thought-out verse that drove these new forms of protest, discussion, and debate. As chapter five, “Visual Irreverence: Cartooning and Caricature” demonstrates, the use of images mocking and spoofing people while repackaging information in “far more immediate, more accessible, and more readily intelligible” ways became wildly popular in the first decades of the twentieth century. Cartoons and caricatures often “paired with texts” already in the newspapers, but they also allowed commentators to create either extremely subtle and intricate critiques or outright vicious attacks on the government and even the Jakkri dynast itself. By today’s standards, these cartoons seem incredibly bold and reveal the diversity of thought and strong desire to avoid a royal monopoly on nationalism.

The idea that journalists, editors, and the literati elites in general sought an alternative to the absolute monarchy and their control of Siamese subjecthood becomes much clearer in chapter six, “A Movement for Popular Sovereignty: 1925-1927.” In this chapter, Copeland shows that non-royal elites began to argue that only through civic nationalism and mass participation could Siam remain independent and create a strong sense of unity as a nation. These authors argued that the monarchy was “an impediment to the national advance” in that it had not promulgated a constitution nor allowed for what we might term public discourse or a parliamentary system of democratic government.

These debates and arguments for more popular representation came to embody a strange similarity to anti-imperialist movements in other Southeast Asian nations such as Vietnam and Indonesia. In chapter seven, “Thai Anti-Colonialism: 1927-1932,” Copeland demonstrates that, despite never being colonized, political journalists began to argue that
in effect Siam was a “free” state in name only. Several authors argued that the monarchy had held on to power and nominal independence, but only at the expense of the nation’s economic and social liberty. Journalists observed that while the monarchy remained sovereign, all economic, military, police, and international functions of the state fell into “white hands.” In this way they argued that Thai independence “had been doubly compromised- once by the West and once by the members of an indigenous ruling elite” desperate to maintain control.

This idea of Siam/Thailand as “doubly colonized” adds a new and interesting twist to issues of the nation’s “semicolonial” status. Likewise, the overall theme that Siamese people participated in their own form of nationalism and its production greatly expands the field. The only aspect of the work that I feel remains underdeveloped is Copeland’s stated preference to see this process as a “singular national project” as oppose to plural “nationalisms.” There must be a reason for this as he states it so clearly in multiple locations. Also, this work makes me very interested in when photography became a popular medium in newsprint. By the 1950s, photographs with commentary seem to take up a large portion of the role filled by cartoon and caricature in the 1920s and 30s. My sense is this process developed during the wartime years and would make for a great extension of Copeland’s work.