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Siam in 1900:  
*A Story of Modernization in the Threat of Colonization*

During the age of Imperialism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Europe dominated the globe. As European nations saw it, their rule brought civilization and modernization to the world, creating global connections never seen before. Europe had colonies throughout Africa and Asia, with few exceptions. One of these exceptions was Siam, known today as Thailand. Positioned between British Burma, British Malaya, and French Indochina, Siam was at constant threat of being taken over by the Europeans, but the nation remained independent. Siam was able to maintain independence during the year 1900 because of its modernization through reform and nationalism, creating a sense of identity that was parallel to much of the world.

Many historians have written about the early 20th century and what it means to be “Modern.” There are many definitions, but one of note is from Charles Emmerson, who argued that this 20th world was “modern” in part because of its globalization. “1913, and the years before it, [was] a period of unprecedented globalization, rich in encounters, interconnections, and ideas.”<sup>1</sup> His idea of globalization reflects the connections during this time period created due to travel, empires, and technology. One of his examples of this globalization through empire is the British gathering for the ‘Pageant of Empire’ which gathered together different nations in the British Empire like Canada, Ireland, and India.<sup>2</sup> These countries created a national identity for themselves even though they were a part of a bigger empire. Siam, however, provides an

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Emmerson, *1913: In Search of the World Before the Great War* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2014) xiii.

<sup>2</sup> Emmerson, 231.

opportunity to see how a country can become “modern” through reform, nationalism, and global connections, without being inside a European empire.

In order to understand why Siam remained largely independent at this time it is important to first understand its diplomatic relations with Britain and France. The early 20th century was “an era when powerful states in the world system did not routinely recognize the sovereignty of weak states.”<sup>3</sup> France and Britain possessed the most territories during this time and thus were the most powerful, and during the 1850s-1880s their territories expanded so they surrounded Siam. Wanting to avoid a repeat of the Anglo-Burmese War of 1852, Britain created treaties with Siam promising them sovereignty in return for trade agreements.<sup>4</sup> However, these treaties were “unequal” because they were much more favorable to Britain, so Britain became a strong economic presence in Siam.<sup>5</sup> The king of Siam at the time, King Chulalongkorn, made sure to balance diplomatic relations with other countries. In the 1880s the French annexed further parts of Vietnam and Cambodia, and in 1893 the French wanted to further expand to Laos.<sup>6</sup> However, this created a crisis because Siam already asserted its claim to that area.<sup>7</sup> Usually Siam relied on Britain for aid, but in this instance Britain let France obtain the Laos territory.<sup>8</sup> France did not have the economic ties Britain had with Siam, so France wanted to expand into Siam’s territory.<sup>9</sup> Britain and France created a treaty in 1896, which marked a significant point in Siamese history because it solidified Britain and France’s permanent boundaries.<sup>10</sup> Beyond these unequal treaties,

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<sup>3</sup> Tomas Larsson, “Western Imperialism and Defensive Underdevelopment of Property Rights Institutions in Siam,” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 8, no. 1 (2008): 2.

<sup>4</sup> David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1982), 183.

<sup>5</sup> Larsson, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Terwiel, 206.

<sup>7</sup> Wyatt, 204.

<sup>8</sup> Wyatt, 204.

<sup>9</sup> G. Leighton LaFuze, “The Anglo-French Rivalry In Siam, 1902-1904,” *Proceedings of the Florida Academy of Sciences* 5 (1940): 229

<sup>10</sup> Wyatt, 204.

Siam exercised its own agency in maintaining a free state because Siam had a strong leader who centralized the government through reform and eventually modernization.

Siam was ruled by King Chulalongkorn from 1868-1910, and he brought major changes and reform to the region. The Siamese officials knew that their military and diplomatic ties were not strong enough to keep European advances at bay, so they turned to reforming the government so European forces could not accuse Siam of being ancient and repressive.<sup>11</sup> Even King Chulalongkorn's father, King Mongkut, who died in 1868, said that Siam needed to go from a “half civilized” people to a truly “civilized” nation.<sup>12</sup> King Chulalongkorn did not change the government structure into a constitutional monarchy like many of the officials suggested, but he did agree reforms needed to be made.<sup>13</sup> Starting in the late 1880s he created departments of the military and education and banned certain activities like gambling.<sup>14</sup> In the 1890s, Britain and France agreed the government in Siam was stable due to the reforms, so the two powers agreed to keep Siam’s independence.<sup>15</sup> This situation is similar to another Asian country during this time period that modernized in order to keep the Europeans out: Japan. However, Siam’s modernization effort was much weaker compared to Japan’s.<sup>16</sup> Some historians argue that Japan faced a much more immediate threat of European invasion and was also more geographically isolated, so Japan had more time to prepare.<sup>17</sup> Siam on the other hand was geographically surrounded and wanted to avoid engaging in military conflicts, so King Chulalongkorn entered

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<sup>11</sup> B.J. Terweil, *Thailand's Political History: From the Fall of Ayutthaya in 1767 to Recent Times*, (Bangkok: River Books, 2005), 201

<sup>12</sup> Wyatt, 189-190.

<sup>13</sup> Terweil, 202.

<sup>14</sup> Terweil, 204.

<sup>15</sup> Wyatt, 208.

<sup>16</sup> Larsson, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Larsson, 6-7.

into a greater number of “unequal treaties” than Japan. Regardless, Siam still succeeded in creating reforms that aided them in remaining independent.

Through modernization, Siam was able to create a sense of nationalism and Siamese identity through a more unified and centralized government. When Chulalongkorn ended slavery, restricted debt-bondage, and ended corvée labor in 1905, the ties that bound rural people to aristocracy were reduced.<sup>18</sup> This changed how the peasants saw themselves, as even though they still worked on the rice fields they now had mildly more favorable conditions.<sup>19</sup> However the larger impact was that the government became more involved in village life, creating a more unified Siam.<sup>20</sup> Changing peasant identities is a key mark of becoming more “modern.” In this case “modernity” related to creating a greater sense of national identity. This relates to Emerson’s argument in looking at other places on the globe like Canada and its national identity. Thus Siam further parallels movements happening in other European-controlled countries.

Siam’s modernization not only created a unified sense of national identity but had multiple identities in Siam change during this time. Siam’s identity shifted with its Chinese immigrant population.<sup>21</sup> Chinese populations moved to the city to work in the markets, creating a transformed sense of what it meant to be Siamese. Another relevant aspect of modernization is that at first King Chulalongkorn thought modernization meant westernization, but when he went to Europe and saw there was poor people there too, it was clear that Europe did not have all the answers.<sup>22</sup> He combined western style teachings with Buddhist teachings, once more creating an

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<sup>18</sup> Wyatt, 215.

<sup>19</sup> Wyatt, 215

<sup>20</sup> Wyatt, 215.

<sup>21</sup> Wyatt, 219.

<sup>22</sup> Wyatt, 211.

alternative to the modern ideal in the early 20th century. However, not everyone agreed with the nationalism and with the changes that came with these modernizations, there were rebellions in different parts of Siam in 1902.<sup>23</sup> Another issue that occurred with modernization is that as Bangkok and the King grew in power, some specific textiles or handicrafts from specific villages disappeared.<sup>24</sup> This shows the cost of “progress,” and it affects nations everywhere, even in cases indirectly caused by the Europeans. Modernization created a sense of identity but affected groups of peoples in different ways.

The year 1900 was a time of change, modernization, nationalism, and globalization, and these ideas can all be reflected in the case of Siam. Looking at the case of Siam is vital to understanding the world before the Great War, because it is both similar and different to the rest of the world. Siam was able to remain independent from Europe because it agreed to unequal treaties and created a system of reform. This modernization became a source for national identity because it centralized the government so rural areas and areas traditionally not ruled by Siam became unified under one national identity. Siam was still connected to the global world despite not being a part of a larger empire because of how it was similar to other countries movements and reflected similar ideals. Researching countries and moments sometimes overlooked by world history, like in the case of Siam, can create vital perspectives for understanding history.

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<sup>23</sup> Terweil, 218.

<sup>24</sup> Wyatt, 215.

## Bibliography

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