John Petersen

Professor Gregory Shaya

The History of the World in 1900

April 3, 2018

Siamese Possibilities in the early 1900s

In the early nineteen hundreds, Siam had, in line with Charles Emerson’s view of the period, become a land of possibilities. This has to do with two main factors: the reality of how Siam fared in the changing world, and the mindset of the Thai people. During the early nineteen hundreds, Siam was, in many ways separate from the rest of the world. It is a unique place, with a unique culture, and this is, in many ways, how Siam was able to distance itself from the world of contradictions that neoliberalism created.

The most striking detail about Siam during this time is the fact that it did not become a part of French Indochina or British India. Siam was actually the only nation in all of Southeast Asia that was able to hold onto its sovereignty; an amazing feat when one considers the enormous disparity between Siam and the major European powers in nearly all aspects. Siam navigated through these dangerous times with caution, and it was not completely unscarred by gun-boat diplomacy. Siam did ultimately end up losing some of its territory in Laos to the French over disputes concerning the Mekong river, but Siam never lost what one would consider any part of the Thai heartland. Siam was able to retain its territory due to the fact that it was serving as a buffer state between British and French colonies, and that, upon the realization that its military war far behind that of European powers, it immediately sought to build up its military. The Siamese did this, not expecting that they would be able to outpace Europe in its military growth, but with the hope that a strong enough military could make war costly enough for the European powers that they would not be interested in using coercive tactics with the nation.[[1]](#footnote-1)

It is no secret that Siam was able to survive the long nineteenth century due to its good fortune in terms of competent leaders. At the turn of the century, King Chulalongkorn, who first rose to power in 1868, was the ruler of the nation. Chulalongkorn was an outward focused leader, and while he fully understood the danger that the west posed to Siam, he was also, in many ways a Europhile. Chulalongkorn grew up with tutors to teach him English, and it was from this exposure that he became engrossed with English culture, and eventually European culture more generally. When Chulalongkorn grew older, and was not able to spend time with his tutors, he was so invested in learning English that he would read English texts on his own time to improve his ability at the language.[[2]](#footnote-2) On can see how much he took English values to heart in the letter that he wrote to his four eldest sons before they would travel to England for school (an event that in itself was unprecedented in Thai history):

*There is no need for you to style yourselves princes… It is my desire that you should regard yourselves merely as Siamese boys of good* *birth… The decision is not the result of a lack of paternal affection… Your father openly owns you as his sons… In Europe princes are few; in our country they are many. Because their princes are not numerous, it is practical for them to maintain their dignity at a higher standard than is possible in our country… Princes who give out their rank without being able to afford the upkeep of their dignity will only bring contempt upon the royalty of their country… Again a prince in a foreign country has no privilege above a commoner, his only advantage is perhaps that he can enter good society, which any other person of good birth can also do… The notion that you have been born princes and can be comfortable through life without doing useful work is one which does not place you above the lower animals, which just come into life, eat and die. But even such animals are useful, for they leave their hides, skins and bones… Wealthy people in Europe, from generation to generation, derived their income from rents and interests. You receive your allowances through me from the people, and such grants are only sufficient for your support and the upkeep of your dignity…[[3]](#footnote-3)*

This excerpt from the King’s letter seems to be entirely in alignment with Locke’s *Second Treatise of Civil Government*, and considering the King’s past in learning the English language, it is more than likely that he would have read Locke and internalized his beliefs. It is likely no coincidence that it was during Chulalongkorn’s reign that slavery was officially abolished under the Siamese flag, even after political concessions had already been given to the slaves generations earlier.[[4]](#footnote-4) Chulalongkorn did not only take European values to heart however. During his reign he made significant efforts to modernize Siam in a way similar to Japan’s efforts during the Meiji restoration. During his reign, Chulalongkorn greatly expanded public education, he built buildings in European styles, and he attempted to modernize the military with European steam ships.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Chulalongkorn was a tremendously skilled leader, but even so, his reforms may not have been possible without the Thai mindset that accompanied his leadership. Siam has long been an extremely progressive nation. During the 1900s opium dens, brothels, polygamy, and kathoey (ladyboys,) were all commonplace in Siam. In addition to societal progressivism, Noel Busch, the author of *Thailand, an Introduction to Modern Siam* argues that the Theravada Buddhism that permeates the nation endorses and more calm, introspective way of thinking in Thai society.[[6]](#footnote-6) Overall, Busch describes Thailand as a very laid back society staying true to its nickname, “The Land of Smiles.” Siam’s progressive autocrat is something that is uncommon in the world, and it is likely Siam’s unique society that allowed such a progressive autocrat to not only maintain power, but to be so popular for the policies that he advocated.

The opportunities for Siam seem to be incredibly abundant in the early nineteenth century. Although Siam’s geopolitical position between British India and French Indochina would seem rather precarious, Siam had already navigate through the toughest gun-boat diplomacy that it would face, and it was rapidly modernizing. A Thai citizen at this time would not be insane to suggest that Siam would, like Japan, be able to develop itself so well that it would be seem as almost European in western eyes. The most interesting thing concerning the possibilities of Siam, however, is the fact that many of the possibilities that Siam could hope for actually do come true. Siam was able to survive only not the long nineteenth century, but also the twentieth century without facing the kind of war that European powers would face. Thailand today boasts one of the strongest militaries in the world, and while it is not a great power, it is able to defend its interests, and it now has the luxury of dealing with more benign threats like Cambodia and Malaysia. Thailand may not be able to compete with western democracies in terms of stability or industry, but it still is the land of smiles.

**Bibliography**

Busch, Noel F. *Thailand an Introduction to Modern Siam*. D Van Nostrand Company, 1959.

Chakrabongse, Chula, Of Thailand. *Lords of Life The Paternal Monarchy of Bangkok*. London: Alvin Redman Limited, 1960.

1. Chakrabongse, Chula, Of Thailand. *Lords of Life The Paternal Monarchy of Bangkok*. London: Alvin Redman Limited, 1960, (229). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Chakrabongse, Chula, Of Thailand. *Lords of Life The Paternal Monarchy of Bangkok*. London: Alvin Redman Limited, 1960, (219). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Chakrabongse, Chula, Of Thailand. *Lords of Life The Paternal Monarchy of Bangkok*. London: Alvin Redman Limited, 1960, (232). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Chakrabongse, Chula, Of Thailand. *Lords of Life The Paternal Monarchy of Bangkok*. London: Alvin Redman Limited, 1960, (245). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Chakrabongse, Chula, Of Thailand. *Lords of Life The Paternal Monarchy of Bangkok*. London: Alvin Redman Limited, 1960, (224, 226, 228). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Busch, Noel F. *Thailand an Introduction to Modern Siam*. D Van Nostrand Company, 1959, (22). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)