

“THE INTRODUCTION OF WESTERN CULTURE IN SIAM.”

**A paper read by H. R. H. Prince Damrong Rajanubhab
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Foreign culture came to Siam from India long before it did from any other country. The Siamese received their religion, art, science and writing originally from India. It would seem that Indian culture alone predominated throughout the Indo-Chinese peninsula for a long time, but became less important from the 13th century as the power of Islam grew in India. It happened that in the same century the Mongols invaded China, and a large number of Chinese emigrated to Cambodia and Siam. Subsequently the Emperor of China – the Yuan Dynasty – sent an Ambassador to establish friendly relations with Siam, in A. D. 1282, when Sukho-daya was the capital of this country, and from that period Chinese culture began to enter Siam.

Of all the European nations, the Portuguese were the first to come to Siam. It was in 1511 that they first came to establish friendly relations and obtained permission to trade. Thereafter a large number of Portuguese followed and settled in Ayudhya. But the Siamese called them “Farang” following the example of the Indian who called all European “Farengi.” That is the origin of the name “Farang” they call you to this day. About thirty years later war broke out between Siam and Burma, and about a hundred Portuguese volunteered to serve in the Siamese army. After the war, in which the Siamese army was victorious, the King of Siam rewarded the Portuguese volunteers by giving them land on the west bank of the river below Ayudhya to make their home and to build their church. Thus the first European community and the Christian Religion came to settle in Siam in the 16th century.

The Portuguese Government at that period wanted to plant Christianity and Portuguese nationality permanently in all the Eastern countries which the Portuguese had conquered or where

they had established trading stations. They therefore encouraged the Portuguese to marry the native women and to bring up their descendants as Portuguese and Christian. That is why there are so many people of Portuguese descent still in India, Ceylon, Siam and other countries in the East down to the present time. These descendants of Portuguese continue to follow the Christian religion but otherwise they have become almost assimilated to the people of the countries in which they live.

When the Portuguese were the only Europeans in Siam a great war occurred between Siam and Burma, lasting for over 50 years. During that period the Portuguese appear to have brought to the Siamese three things, namely, the art of making firearms, the way to use firearms in warfare, and the adoption of fortifications against firearms. The Siamese succeeded in making such good firearms that they actually sent them as presents to Japan. There is a record that in 1606 the Shogun of Japan wrote to the King of Siam to thank him for the firearms and to ask for more. Regarding the use of firearms in warfare the Portuguese were not of use solely to Siam; because they taught the enemy too. But the fortifications, the remains of which are still to be seen at Ayudhya, Svargalok and Sukhodaya, were found very useful. Perhaps there were other things that the Portuguese brought to the Siamese and that we do not know to-day; but the Christian religion did not seem to be generally adopted.

Other European nations began to come to Siam in the 17th century. The Dutch came to Siam in 1604, and the English in 1612. The Danes came in 1621, but they only traded at Mergui and did not come up to establish their factory in Ayudhya as did the Dutch and the English. The two latter nations are Protestant, and only came to trade, having nothing to do with religious propaganda. It seems that the Dutch brought the art of ship-building, while the English a good many of whom entered the Siamese service as navigators of the King's ships, probably taught navigation to the Siamese at that period. The Spaniards too came in the 17th century, but as they backed the Cambodians who were sometimes at war with Siam, they were not particularly welcomed and had no permanent establishment here.

During the last part of the 17th century, in 1662, the French first arrived in Siam. The advent of the French in this country was due to the fact that Louis XIV sent a mission of Roman Catholic priests to find out how best to restore the glory of the church in the East to what it had been, when the Portuguese were at the height of their power. That mission travelled by land through Syria, Arabia, Persia and India. They found that the Moslem power was predominant everywhere but that in Siam, a Buddhist country, every religion was tolerated. They found also that the various peoples in Eastern countries came to trade or to reside in Siam. Therefore they concluded that Ayudhya would be a most suitable place for religious propaganda. Their plan was to teach the various Eastern nationalities that they found in Siam, and let these people, after being converted, convey the Christian faith to their respective countries far and near, the missionaries to follow them afterwards. King Louis and the Pope approved of the idea, and Siam was made the seat of the Bishopric of the Far East. The French mission began their work by giving help to the poor and the sick and even to prisoners. Their charity and kindness began to be known and liked by the people. Siam at that time was ruled by King Phra Narai, who was very liberal and wanted to see his country prosperous and his people happy. Naturally favouring the good work that had been done by the French missionaries, the King got acquainted with them and gave them land to build their church (the Church of St. Joseph which still remains in Ayudhya) and also assisted them in establishing schools. As it happened that Siam was rather in strained relations with the Dutch at the moment, and the King was rather suspicious of the Dutch, the Roman Catholic mission succeeded in establishing friendly relations between King Phra Narai and King Louis who at the same time was at war with the Dutch in Europe and sent out military officers and engineers to assist King Phra Narai. These French experts helped King Phra Narai to build the palace and fortification of Lobburi as a second Capital to be used in case of war with the maritime powers. The French engineers also built two forts at Bangkok, one of which still remains at the Naval School. The Jesuits came to the Court of Siam at that period, and it was said that they exhibited many Euro-

pean things, including a telescope, to King Phra Narai.

The French must have introduced many things into Siam, but practically all that they did was destined to be destroyed because of a singular misunderstanding. The French mission succeeded in converting Constantine Faulkon, a Greek by birth who had been appointed Principal Minister of Siam. This probably led the French Mission to believe that they would eventually succeed in converting the King and afterwards the whole Siamese nation. King Louis assisted them willingly in the endeavour, but it resulted in the creation of a strong anti-French and anti-Christian sentiment among the Siamese nobles, with Phra Pejraja at their head. When the King Phra Narai died, in 1688, revolution occurred and the dynasty was swept away together with all the friends of France. Phra Pejraja became King and naturally undid all that had been done by French influence. From that period down to the destruction of Ayudhya by the Burmans in 1767, although the French missionaries and Europeans of other nationalities were allowed to remain in Siam, no culture appears to have been introduced into Siam by them.

With the destruction of Ayudhya most of the European culture was lost. A few things only survive to this day and they are the casting of cannon, the using of firearms in warfare, and the use of fortifications. Of the minor things introduced by the Europeans we still have medical ointment used in lieu of surgery, also some medical prescriptions said to have been prescribed for King Phra Narai by European doctors. Curiously enough there still remains the confectionery that the Europeans introduced into Ayudhya, namely sponge-cake, which we call "kanom farang," and also oeuffillet which we call "foi thong."

After the destruction of Ayudhya the Siamese were engaged in the war to regain their independence during the reign of King Phya Tak (15 years), and the wars to preserve that independence in the reign of King Rama I (another 28 years). This period coincided with that of the great French Revolution and the subsequent Napoleonic war; and thus Siamese relations with the Western nations came to be suspended for 40 years. During this period Siam was trading principally with China, and China was the only country that had political relations with Siam. Chinese influence

therefore was the influence predominant in Siam. Next to the Chinese came the Indians, whose merchants still continued trading with this country.

Relations between Siam and the Western nations began to revive during the reign of King Rama II, who ascended the throne in 1809. At that time Siam was threatened with wars by both the Burmese and the Annamites. The Siamese Government was pre-occupied in the acquisition of arms and ammunition for the defence of the country. Two ships were bought and commissioned by the Government to carry Siamese merchandise to Macao and Singapore and to bring back arms and ammunition from those ports.

In this connection the Siamese came to adopt the White Elephant as the distinctive emblem of their national flag. The Siamese ships used to fly a red flag, similar to the flag of the ships belonging to Malay and other Eastern countries. It happened that King Rama II possessed three white elephants and acquired the Eastern honour of being "Lord of White Elephant." He ordered the figure of the white elephant within the wheel, which means the Royal Emblem, to be added to the red flag. Subsequently, when the Elephant Flag was adopted for merchant ships, the Royal Emblem (that is the Wheel) was omitted and only the figure of the White Elephant remained.

In 1818 a Portuguese governor of Macao sent an envoy to Siam asking permission for the Portuguese to trade and to construct ships in Bangkok. As the Portuguese assisted Siam to obtain arms and ammunitions the request was readily granted by King Rama II, who appointed a Portuguese agent, Carlos de Silvero, to the rank of Luang Abhaya Vanij and gave the Portuguese the present site of the Portuguese Legation, which was formerly occupied by an Annamite prince, as the Portuguese factory. At this period the French missionaries, who came back to stay with the Portuguese descendants during the reign of King Phya Tak, and the Portuguese were the only Western people settled in Siam. At that time, there was not a single Siamese who could speak any European language, except some of Portuguese descent who still possessed a knowledge of Portuguese. The French missionaries were obliged to make themselves understood in Siamese,

Relations with the British were resumed in the year 1822. The British East India Co. wished to extend their trade to Siam, so the Marquis of Hastings, who was then Governor-General, sent Dr. Crawford as envoy to the Court of King Rama II to propose a treaty of friendship and commerce. It appeared from Crawford's journal that he negotiated the treaty with great difficulty, because nobody here possessed a knowledge of English. Whatever he wanted to say he had to tell his interpreter who translated it into Malay to the Siamese interpreter who again translated it into Siamese to the minister. The answer was received in the same manner. Crawford unfortunately came at a rather bad time, because in the preceding year the Sultan of Kedah, who was then a vassal of Siam, conspired with the Burmese. The Siamese army had consequently been sent to invade and to occupy Kedah. The English who occupied Penang did not like this development. Crawford was sent to negotiate the restoration of Kedah to the Sultan as well as to propose the treaty just mentioned, which the Siamese did not like. But the real hitch was this, that, while the Siamese were willing to give every facility to British trade, they wanted the British to supply them with arms and ammunition in return. At the same time the British wanted to enter into friendly relations with the Burmese as well as the Siamese. Crawford knowing that the Siamese wanted to possess arms and ammunition to fight the Burmese, asked the Siamese not to use such arms and ammunition supplied by the British against the nations that were in friendly relations with the British, and so the negotiations broke down. But general friendship was established and from that day communications of a friendly nature began between the Governments of Bangkok, Penang and Singapore.

King Rama II died and King Rama III ascended the throne in 1824. In that year there was the first war between the British and the Burmese, in which the Siamese was at once invited to enter the alliance. The British then sent Capt. Henry Burney as an envoy to Bangkok with the result that the first treaty between Siam and the British East India Company was made in 1825, and all the difficulties between the two Governments adjusted. It is interesting to note that that treaty was made in four languages, namely Siamese,

English, Malay and Portuguese; because neither the English nor the Siamese knew the language of the other. The treaty brought British ships and traders to Siam. The first English trader appears to have been Robert Hunter, who established his factory close to the settlement of the Portuguese descendants near the Church of Santa Cruz. King Rama III ennobled him with the rank of Luang Viset Banij.

The American missionaries came to Siam in 1828. They originally established stations in China. Having heard in that country that there were large numbers of Chinese settled in Siam, they sent two missionaries here in order to teach Christianity to the Chinese. They came and asked permission of the Government, which was of course readily granted. They at first confined themselves to teaching the Chinese in Sampeng. But, not wishing to neglect the Siamese, they began by giving medical help and treatment. The Siamese at that period took the American missionary to be a physician and consequently called him "moh". That is why the American missionaries are all called "moh" down to this day. When the American missionaries found that they met a friendly reception everywhere, they naturally considered that Siam was another wide field for their work, and they came to establish their Stations in Siam.

The American missionaries have introduced many beneficial things into Siam, including the art of printing Siamese letters. The printing plant was however not invented by the Americans, but by an Englishman called Capt. (afterwards Col.) Low, who was commissioned by the East India Company to learn Siamese, after the Crawford Mission had returned. Low acquired both the speaking and the writing of Siamese. He wrote a book on Siamese grammar for Englishmen to learn Siamese. He had the Siamese characters made into printing type at Calcutta and brought the printing plant to Singapore. When the American missionaries acquired a knowledge of Siamese enough to write a tract, they went down to Singapore to get it printed, and subsequently bought that plant and brought it up to Bangkok in 1836. It was the American missionaries too who introduced vaccination for small-pox into Siam in 1837, and started the first newspaper "The Bangkok Recorder" in 1844.

After Bangkok became the capital, the trade between Siam and China was carried on almost exclusively by Chinese junks, some built and owned in Siam and some in China. When the Europeans returned to trade at Bangkok their ships were so improved and superior to the Chinese junks that the Siamese began to wish to adopt them. At that time a young nobleman called Luang Sidhi, who became Regent at the beginning of the reign of King Chulalongkorn, took a great fancy to shipbuilding. Being a son of the Minister who had authority over the Eastern Provinces, he went down to Chantaboon, where timber was easily procurable, and started a shipyard there, employing foreign shipwrights, I believe both Portuguese and English, to teach shipbuilding. He succeeded and presented the first ship to King Rama III, in 1835. The King was so pleased with the success that he ordered all the Government vessels from that period to be built after the European fashion. At that time the King was restoring a temple, now just north of the Bangkok Dock. He was so convinced that European ships were bound to replace the Chinese junks that he ordered a model of a Chinese junk as a base of a Phra Chedi, saying that posterity who might not know what a Chinese junk looked like would be able to satisfy their curiosity at that temple. The model is still to be seen to this day at Wat Jannawa.

But the most important event that influenced Siamese thought about Western Culture was the first Chinese war with England, which occurred in 1842. Most Siamese at that time believed the Chinese propaganda that the Chinese Government only granted the treaty to England as a compromise in order to avoid annoyance. But there were three men who not only believed that the Chinese had been defeated in the war but were convinced that Western power and influence were to increase in the future in this part of the world. The three men were King Mongkut, who was then a Prince in the priesthood, his young full brother Phra Pin Klao, who became Second King in the reign of King Mongkut, and also the Regent whom I have mentioned. These three men considered that the Siamese should begin to try and acquire knowledge about the Western peoples so as to be prepared for future eventualities. King Mongkut, who was already renowned as a Pali scholar,

and had learned Latin from Bishop Pallegoix, began at once to learn the English language from an American missionary named Mr. Caswell. His brother Phra Pin Klao began to learn English too, but being a Commander of the land forces he preferred to study military art (there is a text-book on artillery translated into Siamese by Phra Pin Klao at that period still in existence), while the Regent, already fascinated by the art of shipbuilding, continued to study building ships of war and steamers more than a knowledge of the language. Besides the three men already mentioned there were other two persons. One was Prince Krom Luang Vongsa, the grandfather of Dr. Yai Snidhavongs, who took up the medical profession, and began to learn European medicine from the American missionaries. The other was Nai Mode Amatyakul, who became director of the Mint in the reign of King Mongkut: he studied chemistry and machinery. But these two did not acquire a use of foreign languages. The five men I have mentioned were the first pro-Europeans of the period. The Regent went so far as to send a student to England in order to learn navigation. This student succeeded in obtaining a master's certificate and served in the reign of King Mongkut.

In 1850 the British Government sent Sir James Brooke as Envoy to Siam to ask for a revision of the Burney treaty. It was the first occasion that communications were carried on in the English language, because Sir James Brooke came direct from England. King Mongkut had then acquired sufficient knowledge of English to be of great use to his brother, but the negotiations broke down, as King Rama III then in a very poor health refused any revision. King Mongkut succeeded to the throne in 1851. During his 26 years in the priesthood he not only acquired a knowledge of foreign languages, but through his extensive pilgrimages, he came to possess a first hand knowledge of the condition of the country and of the people. When he came to the throne he at once discarded the obsolete policy of the former reign, and at the ceremony of his coronation he received foreigners in audience and abolished the custom which hitherto had required the people to close their doors and windows whenever the King passed by. This custom had been copied from China, and King Mongkut allowed all people to approach

him and even to present to him personally their grievances. By such acts the King became popular with his own people and with the foreigners.

Early in the Reign the British Government appointed Sir John Bowring, Governor of Hongkong, and empowered him to make a new treaty with Siam. Sir John Bowring, knowing that a new King who had acquired a knowledge of English and was liberal by nature, had ascended the Throne of Siam, entered into friendly communication by corresponding with King Mongkut, who readily responded.

Sir John Bowring then came to Siam in 1854, and the treaty was easily concluded. Then followed the treaties with the American, the French, and the other European Governments. And Siamese ambassadors were again sent to Europe after an interval of nearly 200 years. Sir John Bowring has written a book about Siam in which he referred to King Mongkut as

“the rare and illustrious example of a successful devotion of
“the time and talent of a great Oriental Sovereign to the
“cultivation of the literature and the study of the philosophy
“of Western nations.”

But there is another fact: King Mongkut was far too advanced compared with his contemporaries, which constituted no small handicap. Besides himself and a few others who were pro-European with him, few understood his policy, and, therefore, when the country was newly opened up to foreign trade, he had to face much trouble. On one hand, the Europeans who came to trade and their respective consuls claimed extra-territorial and treaty rights, and on the other, those who had lost or reduced their privileges by opening up the country claimed to be indemnified. It was both difficult and long work for King Mongkut to adjust; but he never turned nor retraced his step.

Many things and many works that had been created by Western influences during King Mongkut's reign still remain to-day. He employed Europeans and Americans some as interpreters and translators, and some as instructors of the army and police forces, which the King began to model in the European fashion. Some were employed as navigators and engineers of the men-of-war and other

steamers built during his reign. The use of printing presses, the mint, the substitution of the flat for the old bullet coins, the use of copper and tin cents instead of cowries, the Custom House, the New-road, and buildings of European architecture, began in his reign; and there were many things more. But it is curious that one important thing, and one near the King's heart, developed but slowly, viz., the progress made by Siamese in learning European languages. There were large numbers of Europeans settled in Bangkok and the Government had much to do with the foreigners, yet there were few Siamese who had their children taught foreign languages. I believe this was due to the fact that only the missionaries taught such languages, and the parents were afraid of their children being converted to Christianity. King Mongkut himself had two sons before he entered the priesthood. Both of them were too old to learn, while his children born after he came to the throne were still too young. So the education of the Princes had to wait till 1862, when the elder children of King Mongkut, principally King Chulalongkorn, were of school age. Then he employed an English governess in the person of Mrs. Leonowens to teach them. But she did not remain long, and it was King Chulalongkorn alone who acquired a knowledge of English in his father's time.

King Mongkut died in 1868 and King Chulalongkorn succeeded his father at the age of 16, so it was necessary to have a Regent, of whom I have already spoken. The King was however too old to go to school, so it was arranged that he should take a voyage to see for himself the administration of foreign countries. In 1871 he made his first journey to Singapore and Java, and by the end of that year he made another and more extensive voyage to India. No king of Siam had ever left his country before. These two journeys of King Chulalongkorn proved to be of the utmost importance to Siam. Among other things he did on his return two schools were established in the palace: one for teaching English under an Englishman called Patterson, another for teaching Siamese. He ordered all his younger brothers to go to one or other of these schools, whether they liked it or not, and induced the princes and noblemen also to send their sons of school age to these schools. The students of these two schools subsequently served in

His Majesty's service and many rose to high and eminent place. I give just one example in the person of the late lamented Prince Devawongse, who had the unique distinction to be the first Siamese Minister of State to know European languages.

In 1873 King Chulalongkorn became of age and before taking up the administration of his Kingdom he caused another coronation ceremony to be performed. In this connection a most impressive thing happened. As you all know, according to old Siamese custom, anyone coming before the King must prostrate himself on the floor. During the beginning of that Coronation ceremony everybody was following that custom in the great Audience Hall. Then the King ascended the throne and put the crown upon his head. At that moment the King proclaimed the abolition of this ancient custom. At that instant all in the great assembly stood up, and I assure you that it was a most impressive and memorable sight. That was the beginning of many reforms, including the abolition of slavery and many others. King Chulalongkorn followed the lead of his father and with his own genius had made Siam progressive and prosperous throughout, as easily could be seen from the financial reports. The state revenue was from 8 millions ticals in 1868 to 15 millions in 1892 and to 63 millions in 1910, which was the end of his great, happy, and long reign.
