
Reforms, 1850s to 1910s

At the end of the 19th century, Siam was remade as a nation-state. The 'nation' constructed by this process was novel. The areas collected within the borders had very different histories, languages, religious cultures, and traditions. The Thai language seems to have been spoken in the lower Chao Phraya river system and down the upper peninsula, but in practice local dialects varied greatly, and the languages of Bangkok and Chiang Mai were mutually unintelligible. Over the prior century, the expansion of Bangkok's political influence, the influx of war captives, and Chinese immigration had added to the social variety. The fragmentation of the administration gave scope for local difference.

The ideas of nation, unified nation-state, nationality, national identity, and centralized nation-governing bureaucracy were imposed from above. They were adapted from European models and adopted in part to parry the threat of colonial takeover. But they were taken up also to replace old systems of rule and social control that had become less effective as a result of social change and that could not satisfy the new demands of the market economy.

THE DECLINE OF THE TRADITIONAL POLITY

By the mid-19th century, the combination of military expansion and the rising commercial economy had changed the demography of the core kingdom in ways that undermined the traditional political order based on personal ties.

By the 1850s, there were around 300 000 resident Chinese, many of whom had immigrated over the prior two generations. The government initially tried to manage them by the traditional method of absorbing their community leaders into the bureaucracy and making these leaders responsible for their conduct and welfare. But this method did not fit the new facts. The Chinese did not form a 'community' with established

leaders who could be co-opted by the court. They were too many, too varied, too mobile, and too scattered for this old technique to work. In the port, rice mills, sugar factories, and tin mines, they worked together in bigger concentrations than ever seen before. Many were far from Bangkok and difficult to control, particularly in the expanding tin mines down the peninsula. Occasionally they ran riot. Several times in the 1840s and 1870s, troops had to be sent to the sugar tracts east of Bangkok to restore order. The southern town of Ranong was 'almost lost to the government' during a miners' riot in the 1870s. When a gunboat was sent to restore order, the mob reacted by burning and looting Phuket. The ability of striking workers to paralyse the Bangkok port gave the rulers nightmares about a Chinese takeover of the city. In 1889, rival Chinese gangs fought a pitched battle in the centre of the capital for three days.

As with immigrants everywhere, the Chinese formed self-help and self-defence societies. The authorities saw these as *angyi* or *samakhom lap*, secret societies – a term that betrayed their trepidation. The government feared these organizations were smuggling opium, distilling local liquor, and running gambling rackets. They were also armed. Attempts to police illegal opium trading and illegal distilling were occasionally defied by gunfire and even cannon. While Chuang Bunnag was dominant in the government at mid-century, he adopted a policy of *liang aanyi*, 'nurturing the secret societies' and entrusting them to keep the peace.

Besides the Chinese, many other people had escaped the old systems of personal control. Some were drawn off to a new agrarian frontier, especially to grow rice for feeding the growing urban population, for export to China, and for supplies for the armies on campaign. In the 1830s, canals were built east and west from Bangkok to serve as highways for trade and military movements. These canals drained areas of swamp, which were immediately settled by people seeking rice land.

This new frontier allowed peasant settlers to flee beyond the reach of labour controls and policing. For the most part, the government made no objection, while gradually increasing the range of taxes on production, commerce, and entertainments. But from mid-century, it became worried about 'banditry' in the rural areas, and over following decades this worry expanded into an obsession. Some of the bandits were peasants who had suffered a bad harvest or other misfortune. Some were running opium, liquor, and gambling rackets. Some were professional cattle rustlers. Some were just *nakleng*, local toughs who defended their village against predators, including moneylenders and tax collectors. These bandits ambushed convoys carrying tax returns back to Bangkok, looted government granaries,

and seized land. Some became instant folk heroes, celebrated in ballads for their defiance of authority. In some places, peasants copied the example of the *angyi* to form associations for the same mix of self-protection and defiance of the law. Farther afield, in the Lao areas brought under Bangkok influence since the late 18th century, people were occasionally attracted to the support of *phumibun*, men of merit who promised to turn the world upside-down and usher in a millenarian age of justice and plenty.

The 1855 Bowring treaty, and parallel agreements concluded with other western nations soon after, further stimulated the market economy, and increased the strain on the old administrative system in a specific way. They gave extraterritorial rights to foreign citizens, especially the right to be tried by their consuls rather than Siamese courts. Traders who arrived from British Burma or French Indochina sometimes used this protection to defy Siamese officials, avoid taxation, and engage in illegal businesses. Some Chinese merchants secured *protégé* status or allied themselves with foreign *protégés* to avoid law and control. Other Chinese converted to Roman Catholicism as another way to appeal for colonial protection. Siamese official attempts to suppress these activities threatened to create the flashpoint for a typical colonial 'incident'.

In addition, the demands on government became more complex as the economy changed. 'Every day', an official order noted, 'the number of court cases increases, because people are trading and dealing with each other more and more'.¹ The provinces, according to one European visitor, were full of 'unsatisfied litigants, unsettled claims, and untried prisoners'.²

While Mongkut's intellectual interests leaned towards the west, his approach to managing the increasingly disorderly kingdom was very traditional. He revived a great deal of royal ritual, which had been neglected since the fall of Ayutthaya, including the annual festival of the great swing. He travelled to upcountry centres where he gave funds for the repair and upkeep of prominent *wat*, which were adopted as 'royal temples'. He enforced the biennial ritual of allegiance in which the provincial ruler and officials gathered, often at the royal *wat*, and drank the water of allegiance while facing towards the capital. To fortify the capital against enemies, he built six new forts, but also created a new city pillar, cast a new horoscope for the country, and invented Sayam Thewathirat, a protective spirit for the kingdom. Traditionally, most villages and *mueang* had such spirits as a focus of unity and identity, but not the domain of a king. When the ruins of Angkor were rediscovered, Mongkut sent an expedition to dismantle one of its temples to be reassembled in Bangkok and add to the capital's

sacred power, but had to abandon the idea because the temples were too large and the Siamese party was attacked.

Mongkut also issued large numbers of decrees and royal proclamations that were not administrative orders but statements of principle intended to guide the actions of officials and people – somewhat in the style of Chinese imperial rule. Several of these orders were attempts to increase the specialness of monarchy and its distance from the rest of society. He laid down rules on the use of *rachasap*, the heavily Khmer-derived language for use in addressing the king; forbade personal descriptions of the king; outlawed the adoption of consorts with a rural background; and ordered the use of regnal years for the calendar. He laid down a very precise hierarchy within the royal family based on age, the status of the mother, and genealogical distance from the reigning king, along with titles that publicised this fine gradation. He changed inheritance laws to limit the extent to which polygamy might disperse family wealth, especially in the royal family. His own historical sketches, and the chronicles revised in his reign, tried to prove that legitimate patrilineal succession was the norm in Thai history. He laid down forms of address for every level of the social hierarchy from king to slave. He forbade commoners who acquired a *wat* education from getting posts in the major ministries as these were reserved for ‘men of good family and background, the sons of nobles’.³ By using various traditional ways, Mongkut strove for a more hierarchically ordered kingdom under a more elevated monarchy.

Mongkut also looked to China. He sent a tribute mission to ask for formal confirmation of the succession in the usual way, but after the mission was waylaid by rebels, he did not repeat the attempt and later ridiculed the whole idea. He had himself and his son painted in the robes of senior Chinese mandarins. But increasingly he looked to the west. From 1860, he hired westerners as government advisers and set about bringing ‘progress’ to Siam. He tried to centralize tax revenues; issued codes of governance for the rulers of provinces and tributary states; encouraged citizens to make judicial appeals to the king; and imagined himself as a *phramahakasat*, a great king, ruling over an *ekkarat*, a unified and independent kingdom. He told Anna Leonowens, the governess hired to teach English and western manners to his sons, he would ‘doubtless without hesitation, abolish slavery . . . for the distinguishing of my reign’.⁴ In practice, the king’s powers were circumscribed by the power of the great noble families and the limited scope of the administrative machinery. Mongkut’s reign was a time of transition, suspended between different eras and different worlds (Figure 2).



Figure 2: King Mongkut between different worlds: (left) in full Siamese regalia, photographed by Francis Chit in 1864; (right) imagined by an unknown artist in the robes of a senior Chinese mandarin; (bottom) sketched among the palace women by the party of the Comte de Beauvoir visiting in 1866.

The old administrative system based on personalized ties was increasingly ineffective. More people were free of the ties that bound them to the state. The elite's efforts at mobilizing Buddhism as a basis of social discipline, and strengthening traditional hierarchies, were only partially effective. Rulers extracting revenue from the rising commercial economy, as well as entrepreneurs extracting profits, wanted new methods to discipline people, mobilize resources, and protect wealth.

ADMINISTERING A COUNTRY

King Chulalongkorn succeeded his father, Mongkut, in 1868, and over his 42-year reign the old political order was replaced by the model of the nation-state.

On accession, Chulalongkorn was aged 15. During his minority, he travelled to see 'progress' at first hand in the colonial territories of Singapore, Java, Malaya, Burma, and India for 'selecting what may be safe models for the future prosperity of this country'.⁵ He sent 20 minor royals for education in Singapore. He had several European constitutions translated into Thai and was most impressed by the French Code Napoleon. On reaching his majority, he pledged to rule 'so that the royal family, officials and people may continually develop'.⁶ Within a month, he set up a new central treasury, and appointed a Council of State and Privy Council packed with royal relatives. Soon after, he announced a reform programme, 'What the Council should do and what it should abolish'. Among the practices earmarked for abolition were *corvée*, slavery, and gambling. Among the innovations were reform of the law courts; creation of a salaried bureaucracy, police, and army; and development of agriculture and education.

For the reformers, ending labour controls was the priority. Partly this was to thwart colonial criticism; Anna Leonowens made herself famous by portraying the Siamese elite cloaked in 'the darkness of error, superstition, slavery, and death'.⁷ And in part it was to increase the availability of labour for the market economy. While regent during Chulalongkorn's minority, the Bunnag patriarch, Chuang, had drawn up proposals for ending slavery either by taxing it out of existence or by outright abolition. The traditionalists blocked these proposals, which threatened the foundations of their economic and social status. To soothe this group, the king proposed to abolish only certain kinds of slavery and in a gradual way. By an order passed in August 1874, anyone born a hereditary slave from 1868 onwards would gain liberty on reaching 21, and anyone else born after 1868 could not sell himself or be sold into slavery after reaching 21. This still left

existing debt slaves, war captives, the sale of children into slavery, and the corvée system untouched. Reformers such as Chuang had hoped for something more decisive but probably accepted the necessary political compromise.

The labour reforms found the king and the trader nobles in the same camp. But financial and judicial reforms drove a rift between the king on one side, and Chuang and other senior nobles on the other. Chulalongkorn announced the establishment of a Finance Office to take control of all the tax-farms, currently scattered across 17 treasuries. He also announced a new court to take over some of the cases similarly scattered across courts under various ministries. Such centralization would undercut the income and authority of the great nobles, and augment the power of the crown. Chuang and other patriarchs objected strongly. They engineered a coup threat (the 'Front Palace Crisis' of December 1874), which persuaded the king to back down and proceed more slowly.

As a result of royal polygamy, Chulalongkorn had many brothers and half-brothers. He gathered together a group of them along with younger members of some great households, including Bunnag, Saeng-Xuto, and Amatyakun. They called themselves 'Young Siam', implicitly defining their opponents as 'Old Siam' and part of the past. They debated 'progress' and 'reform'. Chulalongkorn absorbed them into experiments in western-style bureaucratic and military organization inside the royal household.

Over the next decade, as each noble patriarch died or retired, Chulalongkorn moved that patriarch's tax-farms under the Finance Office and inserted an ally into the vacant post. In 1885, he placed his brother Narathip in charge of the office, and over the next three years gained the main liquor, opium, and gambling revenues from Bunnag hands. Revenue flow under royal command rose from 1.6 million baht in 1874 to 57 million baht in 1906–07. This was the seed capital of absolutism.

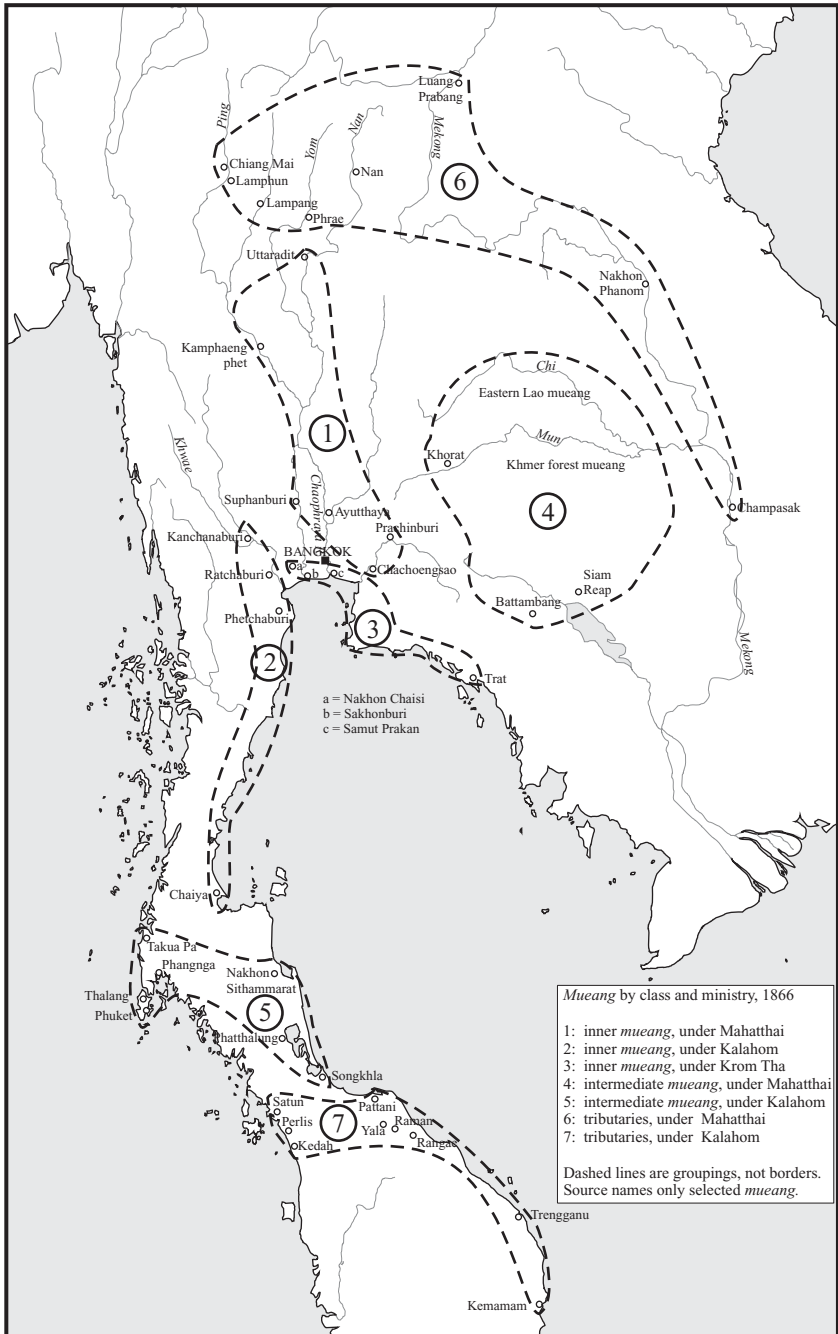
One of the first investments made with this money was in military power. During the regency, Chulalongkorn created inside the palace a new royal guard of 500 men, organized and trained on the model of an English infantry regiment, equipped with the latest western arms, recruited mainly from the nobility, and paid regular salaries – the first officials to enjoy this privilege. In the late 1870s, the learning from this experiment was transferred to the *thahan na*, a regiment guarding the capital. The old levies were released. New men were recruited for a five-year tour of duty with pay. Europeans helped with training. Modern rifles were purchased. An impressive barracks was built beside the palace (later converted into the Ministry of Defence). The force was small – around 4400 men – but

enough to chase after bandits, intimidate the secret societies, and police the capital at important times.

This force was critical for Young Siam's major project – a new centralized pyramid of bureaucratic administration, replacing the local lords. On Chulalongkorn's accession, Bangkok's political hinterland was a patchwork of *mueang* tied to different ministries by varying systems (Map 3).⁸ 'Inner' *mueang* supposedly had Bangkok-style tax systems, conscription, and appointed officials, though in practice many governors were effectively hereditary. 'Intermediate' *mueang* were ruled by local lords sending dues of forest goods, while tributaries sent only symbolic tribute.

The pioneer case for centralization was the former tributary state of Lanna (Chiang Mai). The inroads of British timber companies into the northern forests threatened to become a spearhead of colonial intrusion. They also entangled the Lanna rulers in court cases and debts that gave Chulalongkorn his opportunity. He bailed out the debts, took charge of negotiating an Anglo-Siamese treaty in 1874 to constrain the colonial loggers, and sent a commissioner to oversee the tributary state's government. The commissioner arrived in Chiang Mai at the head of a column of troops from the new paid and permanent force. The king instructed the commissioner (a half-brother) as follows: 'We have no thought of removing the court and tributary status, but we want to seize the real power. . . you must achieve this by wisdom more than by force, without letting the Lao⁹ feel they are being squeezed'.¹⁰ The commissioner gradually introduced Bangkok-style taxes, appointed local officials, and took charge of the timber concessions. The local nobles complained that Lanna was being 'picked to the bone' and some officials raised a revolt. The commissioner soothed the nobles with fancy titles and large allowances, but gradually distanced them from the administration, diverted the tax revenues to the Bangkok treasury, and established a pyramidal bureaucracy down to the local level.

The resulting structure looked uncannily like the colonial government of a British Indian district. It became the model. Commissioners were sent to other frontier states – Luang Prabang, Nong Khai, Khorat, Ubon, and Phuket – backed up with troop columns that remained to serve as garrisons. Local rulers were left as figureheads, but on death were replaced by a Bangkok appointee, often a royal relative. In 1893, Chulalongkorn appointed perhaps his favourite half-brother, Damrong Rajanuphap, to head a new Ministry of Interior, which adapted this system for use in the inner provinces. The old semi-hereditary governing families of these provinces were superseded by central appointees in the same way. In 1899, the new structure was formalized in legislation. By 1914, the Ministry of



Map 3: Political geography on the eve of reform.

Interior had appointed 3000 officials to the provinces. Many of the old people and old practices were still in place, but they were now technically part of a single bureaucratic pyramid extending down from the ministry. From 1902, officials were paid salaries from the centre, rather than living off the local profits of their office. Previously, provincial governors had administered from their house or compound. Now new official enclaves were built in the provincial centres, rather on the model of a colonial cantonment, with offices, a jail, and housing for officials, all intended to impress through scale and standard design. Damrong christened the new system *thesaphiban*, control over territory.

Judicial reform followed a similar centralizing pattern. In 1892, all cases in the capital were transferred from courts under various ministries to a new unified structure. Beginning in 1902, commissioners were sent to the provinces to reorganize their courts under a single hierarchy. A decree of 1908 formally brought all courts under the Justice Ministry. Court procedure was changed to resemble western practice, formalized in a code in 1908.

In the inner areas, there was little reaction. Many old nobles resented the loss of revenue and power, but usually they were not dislodged but allowed to retire gracefully. Their sons were encouraged to enter the schools, which were the portal into the new bureaucracy. This new generation of the old central elite seems to have embraced Chulalongkorn's interpretation of 'progress' as a way to retain their status in a changing world. But at the periphery, there were revolts.

In 1895, villages in Khon Kaen revolted and excluded officials for three years. In 1889–90, some 3000 opposed the new administration in Chiang Mai. In 1901, 2500 rebels joined a millenarian revolt in the Ubon area of the northeast. In 1902, the southern border states threatened to revolt, rebels took over the northern state of Phrae, and smaller incidents occurred in Lampang and Lamphun. Many of these outbursts were directed against the new taxes. Some were led by displaced local officials and abetted by the old rulers. In Lanna, rebels attacked the new government offices and vowed to drive out the Siamese officials and Chinese tax-farmers. In both Lanna and Isan, these revolts drew on a tradition of uprisings by *phumibun*, men of merit, who could overthrow the social order and usher in a better world. The northeastern rebels sacked the town of Khemmarat on the Mekong, and then set off towards the provincial capital of Ubon. Their stated aim was 'to establish a kingdom which was not under either the Siamese or the French'.¹¹

Initially, these revolts caught the government off guard. But rebels armed with local weapons and trusting in the power of sacred water to guarantee

invulnerability were no match for Gatling guns and cannon. In the north-east, troops claimed to kill 200 rebels without incurring a single casualty. In Lanna, 13 leaders were captured, pilloried for three days, and then executed. In the south, the ruler of the Malay Muslim state of Pattani was thrown into jail for two years. The revolts petered away in the face of these shows of force, but they had delivered a shock to Chulalongkorn and his court. Especially in Lanna, the implementation of the new administration ground to a halt for three years.

SCRAMBLING BOUNDARIES

In parallel with this transition to a new form of administration, the old political geography based on *mueang*, emboisement, and personal relations between rulers was replaced by a model based on territory and borders. In Thongchai Winichakul's famous coining, Siam gained a 'geo-body'.¹²

In the old political system, there were no boundaries as lines on maps or along the ground. Two *mueang* occasionally marked their frontier by a cairn, *chedi*, or customs post along the route connecting the two centres. Most *mueang* were separated by large and mostly empty tracts of forest, such as the hill ranges dividing Siam from Burma, and these tracts 'belonged to no-one'. Rulers liked to see frontiers not as barriers but, rather, as 'silver and gold roads of trade and friendship', channels for possible expansion of their trade and influence. In peripheral areas, local rulers might be tributary to two or more overlords, and these arrangements could shift with circumstance.

Once Britain became a neighbour to the south and west in the 1820s, it asked Siam to define their mutual borders. At first the Siamese court found this perplexing and rather irritating, and only reluctantly complied.

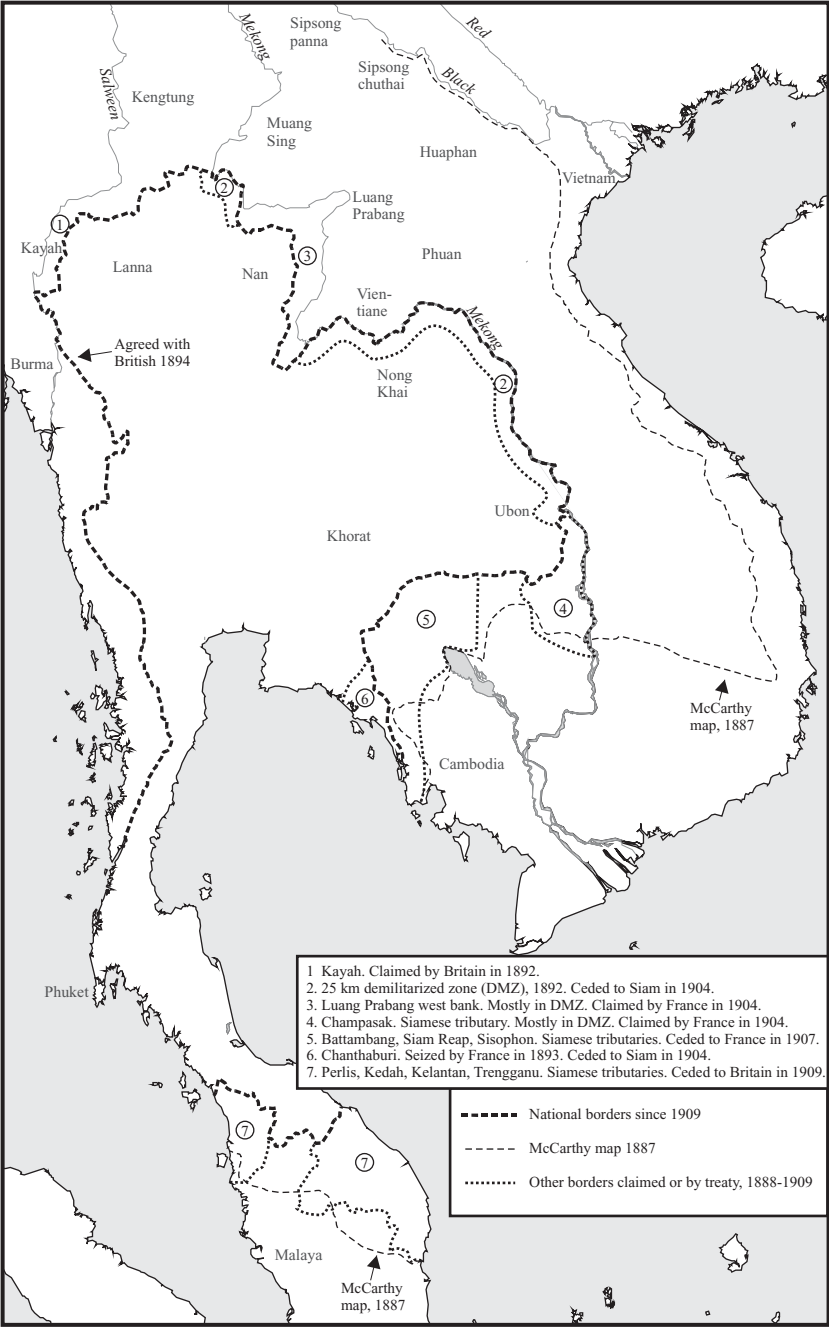
From the 1860s, colonial pressure became more complex. The British nibbled away at the southern border, and in 1852–53 grabbed another chunk of Burma. The French pressed inwards from the east, taking Saigon and then imposing a protectorate over Cambodia in 1863. Siam rushed to sign a treaty agreeing the protectorate was shared, and rationalized that this was simply an extension of Cambodia's former tributary submission jointly to Vietnam and Siam. But the French wanted more. French colonial dreams alternated between hopes of finding a northward route from Indochina into China and consolation of forging westwards across mainland Southeast Asia. After the Garnier-Lagrée expedition of 1866–67 showed the Mekong River was not navigable up to China, one of the French men-on-the-spot declared: 'Our desire is to bring into being that French empire dreamed



Figure 3: Siamese nobility on the eve of the west. Mom Rachotai, early student of the missionaries, envoy to London, and author, c. 1860s. His dress and props are of various Asian origins – Thai, Chinese, Persian, Indian, Arab – only the books are western.

of by some of us, which must extend from Kwang Tung and Yunnan all the way to the vicinity of Bangkok'.¹³ The French also introduced another western concept – the idea of historical claims to sovereignty over territory. They began looking for documents that showed that Vietnam (and hence its successor, France) had better claims to many of the peripheral territories lying between Hanoi–Saigon and Bangkok.

At the same time, western business interests began to arrive in Siam. British timber companies cut their way through Burmese forests and arrived in Lanna. Tin-mining firms overflowed northwards from British Malaya. Both gained concessions from Siam's local tributaries. At Bangkok, western speculators floated schemes for cutting a canal across the peninsula, mining various metals, and building far-flung networks of railways reflecting grand imperial ambitions. For Siam, defined borders had become a good defensive idea. In 1880, Siam hired a British surveyor, James McCarthy, from India, and sent him off to map the frontiers, especially in the far northeast. Along with McCarthy went columns of troops, supposedly tasked to suppress 'Ho' bands, probably refugees from the Taiping rebellion in southwestern China. The troops' real job was to strengthen claims to the territory behind the mapped line by planting Siamese white-elephant flags, handing out Siamese titles to local chiefs, building stockades, and sometimes tattooing men for *corvée*. McCarthy's map, published in 1887, showed a border running southwards from Sipsongpanna along the Annamite hills into Cambodia (Map 4). In Thongchai's phrase, this map was 'the encoding of desire'.¹⁴ The southern and western borders with British territory were agreed relatively easily in 1894 and 1909 by sharing out local polities, which had previously been tributary to both sides. France was more difficult. It responded with its own maps, historical claims based on local documents, and troop columns sent to occupy the peripheral areas. The issue was settled not by maps or historical precedent but by force. In 1893, France annexed the east bank of the Mekong southwards from the Chinese border. To oppose them, Siam attempted to raise 180 000 troops, the biggest military mobilization for over a century, but could find only a fraction of this number. Units clashed with the French near the Mekong River. In response, the French sailed two gunboats up the Chao Phraya River and anchored off the French embassy. They demanded an indemnity and Siamese evacuation from the east bank of the Mekong. When the government demurred, the French blockaded the port, demanding a 25-kilometre demilitarized zone on the west bank of the river, and *protégé* status for Vietnamese, Lao, and Khmer in Siam. This Paknam Incident resulted in a treaty that drew the boundary between



Map 4: Drawing Siam's borders, 1892–1909.

Siam and French Indochina along the Mekong River, subtracting the Lao states of Luang Prabang and Vientiane, the northern Khmer territories, and much of Sipsongpanna and Sipsongchuthai from the ambitions coded on the McCarthy map. The British blocked the idea of a French protectorate over Siam. But the two countries informally and secretly agreed that Siam should eventually be reduced to the Chao Phraya basin, ceding the eastward territories to France and the peninsula southward to Britain. The French and British men-on-the-spot began manoeuvres to achieve this result. But after 1900, the home governments quashed these colonial ambitions and rivalries for the sake of alliance in Europe against the growing threat of Germany. Treaties concluded between 1902 and 1909 fixed the borders at their present positions. Siam had become a defined, bounded country. Many states along the peripheral areas had disappeared. According to the western theory that Siam was embracing, the capital of Bangkok enjoyed unique and undivided sovereignty across the territory inside this new boundary.

MAKING CITIZENS

In parallel, all the various categories of slaves and bondsmen with personal ties to a patron or overseer were transformed into citizens with a theoretically direct relationship to the state.

In 1897, Chulalongkorn took another step to end forced labour by ruling that nobody born from then onwards could sell himself or be sold into slavery. Only a few ageing debt slaves and war captives now remained (until final abolition in 1912). Abolishing *corvée* was more complicated because it affected the army, which was needed to protect the mapping parties, skirmish with the French, hunt down bandits, guard against Chinese riots, and suppress the peripheral rebels. Through the late 1870s and early 1880s, Chulalongkorn found ways to convert some people from noble to royal service. Then in 1887, another half-brother was placed in charge of a new Defence Ministry and instructed to plan a conscript standing army.

Many in the court disagreed with this project. They argued that Siam could not hope to compete with a European army and should not provoke the Europeans by trying. But Chulalongkorn insisted that a standing army was one of the attributes of a modern nation. Besides, the real need was not external, against the colonialists, but internal – imposing Bangkok authority on the area inside the new borders, and bringing all people under the king.

Several of Chulalongkorn's sons had been sent to military academies in Europe. When the first of these returned in 1897, he was entrusted with

planning a new army. The difficulty of suppressing the provincial revolts over 1899–1902 further convinced Chulalongkorn and dispersed most of the opposition: ‘Conscription is a necessity. If we fail to introduce it, that would be tantamount to throwing Phayap [Lanna] away.’¹⁵ Conscription was hurriedly implemented in three provinces to complete the suppression of revolts, and then introduced universally by 1905. Commutation dues were replaced by a universal poll tax (extended to include the Chinese and other foreigners in 1909). Military expenditure rose from 1 million baht in 1898 to 13 million in 1909–10, when Siam had a standing army of 20 000 and a navy of 5000, with over 50 000 in their combined reserves.

All men were now the king’s men. Almost everyone now stood in the same relationship to the state for tax and military service. In parallel, they were also reinvented as members of the same race.

MAKING THAI

The return of the westerners in the early 19th century, and the involvement of Siam in a network of treaties, began a debate about the nature of the people inhabiting Siam and their relations to others. The conventional yardstick used to differentiate peoples was language. Foreigners as a category were called the people of the ‘12 languages’ or ‘40 languages’. In the 1830s, these were partially catalogued in a display at Bangkok’s Wat Pho, with 27 different peoples each portrayed on a door panel and described in an accompanying poem. These pictures and poems brought in the idea that different peoples not only spoke different languages but also *looked* distinctive – both in physical features and dress. The poems also occasionally mentioned that some peoples had special character traits. The Thai were portrayed as part of this catalogue:

The Siamese, handsome as if shaped by heaven,
 Dwells in the prosperous and glorious city of Ayutthaya.
 Look! He exudes power and inspires awe across the world.
 His upper cloth is woven with silver and gold thread.
 The lower cloth, boldly patterned, is smartly held by a silk sash.
 The effect is gracefully beautiful, gloriously powerful, perfectly resplendent.¹⁶

This description clearly made no attempt to encompass all the people within Siam. The poem described a noble and made a claim for the Thai elite to count among those peoples with power over others.

The ruling elite might be conceived as ‘Thai’, but at this period the court still celebrated the great ethnic variety of peoples within the country. The

king's rule extended over all those who, in the royal rhetoric, had 'sought the royal protection'. In dealing with foreigners, the state called itself Siam. Mongkut signed himself as *Krung Sayam* and Chulalongkorn as *Sayamin* (Siam + Indra). In keeping with the principle of emboxment, Siam could mean either the capital or the larger unit emboxed by the capital's influence. The outer areas were defined according to their linguistic-ethnic identity as the 'eastern Lao', 'northwestern Lao', 'Khmer', and 'Malay' or 'Khaek' states, emphasizing Siam's imperial reach over other peoples. During his 1872 visit to India, Chulalongkorn described himself as 'King of Siam and Sovereign of Laos and Malay'.¹⁷

Europe had evolved the idea that a nation was the political expression of a 'race'. From the 1880s, the French used this idea as part of their aggression against Siam. They argued that the Lao, though related linguistically to the Thai, qualified as a distinct race. Meanwhile, the Siamese were not a proper race because they had become too intermixed with the Chinese. Hence, the true Siamese were a minority within their country, and in fact a 'Lilliputian oligarchy' dominating subject peoples.¹⁸ In this discourse, the French colonial seizure of Siam would mean liberation of the majority of its people. In the treaty following the 1893 Paknam Incident, France went some way to realizing this idea through the clause allowing former inhabitants of Indochina now in Siam to claim French protection. The French aggressively expanded the range of people who could qualify as *protégés*, beginning from descendants of peoples moved across the Mekong since 1828, and widening to include all claiming Khmer or Lao descent, and even many Chinese who had sought colonial protection for commercial advantage. The Thai court was horrified. Some wondered whether the king might be Khmer enough to qualify for French *protégé* status. Many people registered themselves as *protégés* to escape *corvée*. French entrepreneurs planned enclave businesses using *protégé* labour.

The Siamese court learnt how to use this discourse of race. In the late 19th century, it evolved the word *chat*, which originally meant birth, origin, or a cycle of rebirth, to express ideas corresponding to race. To define the Thai race, two overlapping definitions were used in parallel. First, the old way of defining people by language was adapted so that speakers of other Tai languages could be claimed as Thai. Commissioners sent to the periphery were instructed to persuade the local lords that 'Thai and Lao are of the same *chat* and speak the same language within a single kingdom'. Damrong claimed that 'all these people call themselves by different names . . . such as *chao Sayam, Lao, Shan, Lue, Ho* . . . in fact all are Thai ethnic groups

(*chon chat Thai*). They speak Thai and every one of them hold that they themselves are Thai'.¹⁹ Second, all those living within the borders and hence subjects of the king were defined as Thai. As the Bangkok commissioner in Lampang told a public dinner: 'the distinction between Siamese and Lao no longer exists – we are all subjects of His Majesty'.²⁰ In a border dispute with the British in 1885, Chulalongkorn blended these two definitions together: 'The Thai, the Lao, and the Shan all consider themselves peoples of the same race. They all respect me as their supreme sovereign, the protector of their well-being'.²¹

Similar ideas were written into the first textbooks for the new schools (see below). Nation was a cultural community founded primarily on language: 'We are of the same nation and speak the same language, so how can we not love each other more than we love other people who belong to other nations and speak other languages?'²² This cultural community was also formed by a common religion (Buddhism) and common history. At the same time, nation was a political concept, demanding its members' loyalty and self-sacrifice.

At the turn of the century, Bangkok changed the geographical vocabulary to reflect this new idea. The new territorial provinces formed from 1899 were no longer named as Lao, Malay, or whatever, but given Sanskrit names, some of which identified provinces as the northern, eastern, and so on, parts of the kingdom. Damrong explained this was because their inhabitants 'were really of the Thai race', and the new names reflected the existence of 'a united Thai kingdom'.²³

In Thai versions of treaties from 1902, the country was no longer called Siam but *Prathet Thai* or *Ratcha-anajak Thai*, the country or kingdom of the Thai. All people within the kingdom were defined as *sanchat Thai*, translated in the English versions of the treaties as 'of Thai nationality'. To bring the legal position into line with this new match between territory and nationality, Siam insisted the colonial powers give up the extraterritorial rights of the *protégés* as part of the border treaties. To achieve this, the government ceded considerable territory in recompense. In 1907, Siam abandoned its claims to the northwestern Khmer provinces (Siam Reap, Battambang, and Sisophon) in return for French agreement to give up extraterritoriality. In 1909, the four Malay states of Kedah, Kelantan, Trengganu, and Perlis were ceded to Britain in return for the same concession (see [Map 4](#) on page 59).

The Siamese court had adopted a new term, *prathetchat* or *chatprathet*, which matched the compound form of 'nation-state' and had some of its strength and confusion. On the one hand, Thai was now simply the

definition of all those who lived within the Thai kingdom; this idea was codified in the *Nationality Act* of 1913, under which all born inside the borders could claim the nationality. On the other hand, this definition also laid claim to represent a social reality of people unified by language and perhaps by ethnic origin.

While this unified Thai-ness was presented to foreigners, internally the court retained some subtle differentiation. Commissioners sent to the periphery were told to emphasize the common identity of Lao and Siamese when talking to foreigners, but to retain some of the old Thai–Lao difference in private. The description of Siam sent to the international exhibition at St Louis in 1904 catalogued the ‘great Thai race’ into three parts: the original and more sophisticated ‘Siamese or Thai’; then the Shan or Lao ‘neighbouring races’; and finally others, such as Khmer, Malay, and Burmese who were ‘originally . . . prisoners of war’ but had ‘intermarried with the Siamese and all speak the Siamese language’.²⁴ School textbooks distinguished between those who spoke ‘proper’ cultivated Thai and others who were encouraged to improve themselves in order to qualify fully as members of the nation.

The elite began to define a more complex sociology of those who were now defined as the Thai nation. Mongkut had travelled upcountry both while a monk and later when king. Chulalongkorn travelled much more, pretending to be incognito and revelling in being recognized. Damrong, and other officials engaged in mapping the new administration onto the territory, travelled even more. Like the *farang* travellers earlier, Damrong and others took notes on what they saw. From the 1880s, they began to write studies describing and classifying the variety of peoples found in the new nation-state.

These studies stratified people into three broad bands. At the bottom were the hill peoples. An army general engaged on mapping and protecting the new borders described them as living in the jungle; strange, wild, dirty, and half-naked; and beyond civilization or any hope of progress. Next came the agricultural people of the lowland. Damrong described them as more familiar, more docile, and clearly engaged in production that was useful for the economy, yet still simple in their ways and superstitious in their beliefs. At the top were the princes and senior officials of the elite. They aspired to be *siwilai*, a Thai-ification of ‘civilized’, which expressed the desire to ‘progress’ on the model of the west, and thus qualify to dominate other peoples within and beyond the country’s borders. The ‘Thai race’ was both united and divided.

MAKING BETTER CITIZENS

The new nation-state assumed the authority to discipline the peoples of such different backgrounds and mentalities enclosed within the borders. The new army was used almost totally to impose order inside the country; Chulalongkorn called the detachments sent against the northern rebels 'an army of occupation'.²⁵ A new police force was also formed, originally to control the Chinese 'secret societies' when the government resolved to close down the gambling dens in the early years of the 20th century. A jail was a standard part of each province's headquarters.

Prince Ratchaburi, another of Chulalongkorn's sons, returned from Oxford with a law degree and was assigned to create a judicial system. He favoured a common-law approach but was overruled on grounds that foreigners would be more impressed by a codified Roman law. A criminal code was completed in 1908. Ratchaburi also wanted the judiciary to be truly separate from the bureaucracy. Again he was overruled. Chulalongkorn had seen colonial systems that combined judiciary and bureaucracy for tighter control.

The nation-state was thus equipped with instruments of coercion. For the longer term, however, people had to be moulded into good citizens of the nation.

The aspiration, evident since early Bangkok, to draw on Buddhism to educate and discipline society was adapted for the framework of the nation-state. Mongkut and Chulalongkorn appointed a series of royal family members as the supreme patriarch of the Sangha. From 1874, these were members of Mongkut's reformed Thammayut sect. In 1893, Chulalongkorn entrusted Vachirayan – another half-brother, Thammayut monk, and future supreme patriarch – to head a new Buddhist Academy to improve the training of monks. Then in 1898, Chulalongkorn moved Vachirayan to develop primary education by expanding the traditional system of schooling in the *wat*. Vachirayan began by sending out Thammayut monks to survey the provinces. Their reports showed how varied were the peoples and religious practices in the regions now enclosed within the borders of Siam. Local *wat* had their own texts and traditions. Provincial monks worked in the fields, participated in village festivals, preached using homely folk tales, and had limited knowledge of canonical texts. On receiving these reports, Chulalongkorn diverted Vachirayan to the task of unifying and disciplining the monkhood. The resulting *Sangha Act* of 1902 arrayed all monks in a hierarchy stretching down from the

king and supreme patriarch. Monks learnt from a standard syllabus, qualified by centrally administered examinations, and preached from approved texts. New *wat* were encouraged to conform to a standard design. Vachirayan gently coaxed Lanna monks to abandon their very established local traditions, and gathered well-known monks from the truculent north-east and distant south into the Thammayut order. Vachirayan hoped that Buddhism would be 'a tight binding between the government and the people'.²⁶

Vachirayan then returned to training monks and producing standard textbooks for the new primary education. All children were to be taught the Central Thai language, Buddhism, and arithmetic. In 1921, primary education was made compulsory. Funds were sparse but by the mid-1920s 40 per cent of children aged 7–14 attended the schools.

One of the subjects of the standard curriculum was proper behaviour. In the 1900s, Chao Phraya Phrasadet composed a textbook for this discipline. He had been one of the early descendants of noble families to enter the new schools, had undergone ordination in the Thammayut order at Wat Boworniwet, and then served as Damrong's secretary. His *Sombat Phu Di* (The Qualities of Gentlefolk) instructed a generation of the newly educated to be neat, well-mannered, respectful, likeable, dignified, pleasing to the eye, good-natured, selfless, trustworthy, and free of vice – the code of behaviour of an ideal bureaucrat. Phrasadet rose to head the Civil Service School. His text began a tradition of state manuals for the instruction of children and citizens.

Progress required a large and healthy population, and thus the new state became concerned about the health of its citizens. The first hospital was founded in 1888 (Sirirat) and a medical school in 1890. After a succession of plague outbreaks between 1904 and 1906, the government issued public health regulations designed to prevent and contain both plague and cholera. It also began to designate *sukhaphiban*, sanitary districts, charged with maintaining public hygiene. To gather the information base for these policies, an Act in 1917 mandated regular population censuses, and registration of births, deaths, and residence.

MODERN, MAGNIFICENT MONARCHY

In parallel with this remaking of the polity and the people, the monarchy was transformed.

First, it acquired a new financial base. The Privy Purse was originally established to use the profits of royal trading to pay the royal household.

It was expanded to finance overseas education for royal and noble scions, and then expanded again as the Privy Purse Bureau (PPB) in 1890 as the palace's investment arm. Between 5 and 20 per cent of government revenues was channelled to the PPB. Some was used to enter the expanding rice economy by investing in rice mills. Some went to property development, building shophouses along new roads in the expanding city, and markets in the upcountry centres; by 1910, the PPB was the country's largest property holder. Some went into company investments, often in joint ventures with foreign partners, in railways, tramways, electricity, banking, cement, coalmining, and steam navigation.

Next, royalty expanded its role in the government. Previously, royal relatives had been excluded from senior official posts. Now they dominated them. When Chulalongkorn formed a council of 12 ministers in 1892, nine were his brothers and half-brothers. He sent his four eldest sons overseas for education in 1885, and drafted them and other royal cousins into senior military and official posts when they returned from the mid-1890s onwards.

Royalty had a privileged place in the new schools founded to train people for official careers. In 1881, Damrong founded Suan Kulap School specifically to educate civil servants. It admitted 'only the sons of princes and the highest nobles'. After several commoners enrolled, the fees were raised 'to prevent common people from attending the school'. The King's School, founded in 1897 to prepare students to study overseas, was similarly restrictive. Damrong hoped to limit recruitment to the upper ranks of the expanding bureaucracy to 'those who are high born (*phu di*) or who are acceptable because of wealth'.²⁷ The Civil Service School founded in 1899 initially attracted few from the nobility, so it was renamed the Royal Pages School to increase its cachet. The Military Academy founded in 1897 was officially restricted to those of royal or noble birth. In 1906 the birth restrictions were tightened, and in 1909 an elite stream was created for sons of the highest families. In 1910, every military officer ranked lieutenant general or above was a member of the royal family.

For other senior posts, foreign advisers were favoured. From 1860, a handful were hired for technical skills. After the 1893 Paknam crisis, the numbers increased within four years to 58 British, 22 Germans, 22 Danes, 9 Belgians, 8 Italians, and 20 others. These advisers not only brought expertise, particularly in international finance, but also helped in dealing with the threats from the colonial powers. Chulalongkorn noted that 'to employ foreigners is like having ready-made textbooks'.²⁸

In broader ways, the court associated itself more and more with Europe as the source of power and knowledge. In the 1870s, male fashion in the

court began to copy western fashions of longer hair, moustaches, hose, and shoes. By the 1890s this had extended to trousers, tailored suits, hats, and dress uniforms for ceremonial occasions. When the king visited Europe, *Tailor and Cutter* magazine declared that he 'looks just like an English gentleman'.²⁹ In the 1870s, Chulalongkorn built a new throne hall with an Italianate design, but topped it with a Siamese roof to please traditionalists. In 1907, this compromise was surpassed by the stridently classical Ananta Samakhom throne hall built with Carrera marble, Milan granite, German copper, and Viennese ceramics. The building dominated the entrance to a new royal quarter to the north of the old city, housing a European-style palace complex and other mansions built for other members of the royal clan. King and nobles imported European bric-a-brac to embellish these new homes.

In 1897, Chulalongkorn travelled to Europe. In part, this was shrewd diplomacy following the Paknam Incident of 1893. The French colonial minister immediately understood the significance: 'it will give the impression that the kingdom of Siam, whose sovereign has been received in the manner due to a European head of state, is a civilized country which should be treated like a European power'.³⁰ In part, it was a way for the king to see *siwilai* for himself. In part, it portrayed the king to his subjects as a new kind of sovereign who moved among the world's royal elite.

This new westernized monarchy became more public. In early Bangkok, pellet-archers still went ahead of royal processions to prevent people viewing the royal body. After an archer injured a woman late in the Third Reign, they were limited to 'threatening persons showing disrespect'. Mongkut stopped the whole practice and welcomed spectators at his royal rituals and provincial tours. Chulalongkorn exposed the royal body and its image much more. He delighted in being photographed, painted, and sculpted. He allowed his image to be reproduced on coins, stamps, mementoes, and postcards. He rode around Bangkok in an open landau and later an automobile (Figure 4). From 1899, he mingled among a select crowd at an annual fair at Wat Benjamabophit. In 1908, a statue of Chulalongkorn astride a horse was unveiled in front of the new Italianate throne hall. Cast in Paris and portraying the king in western military attire, the image was the first use of statuary outside a religious context, and a massive statement of the royal presence in the capital.

In the latter part of the reign, this open and modern monarchy was presented to the public in grand spectacles. The city was remodelled around the turn of the century by two avenues inspired by the Champs Élysées



Figure 4: King Chulalongkorn, modern and revealed. Probably in the Dusit quarter in the early 1900s.

and named Ratchadamnoen, the royal way. They were used for magnificent processions on the occasion of the king's return from a second trip to Europe in 1907, and on the 40th anniversary of his reign a year later. Both these events were themed as celebrations of the 'progress' achieved during the reign. Government departments built ceremonial arches and parade floats to dramatize advances in agriculture, health, taxation, railways, telegraphy, and electricity generation. Three years later, Chulalongkorn's son and successor, Vajiravudh, held a second coronation, attended by royalty from Britain, Russia, Greece, Sweden, Denmark, and Japan. The event lasted 13 days, accompanied by a popular fair, and used up 8 per cent of the national budget.

Several reforms were designed to secure and dramatize the continuity of the Chakri dynasty. Mongkut had stated that 'the king is a human' and that 'attributing kingship to divine power detracts from the merit and capabilities of the man'. But the transmission of these capabilities, he insisted, was carried in the royal blood. A king was 'someone of good birth based on former lives of excellence on both sides [that is, both maternal and paternal]'.³¹ Mongkut finessed the succession by giving his

favoured son, Chulalongkorn, an unquestionably higher title than any rival, and rewarding Chuang Bunnag for overseeing the process. Chulalongkorn adapted western practice to ensure dynastic continuity. He abolished the concept of the Front Palace and introduced the idea of nominating an heir. He then rewrote the Palace Law, basing the succession on European-style primogeniture modified to accommodate polygamy. In 1916, his successor, Vajiravudh, further emphasized continuity by retrospectively renaming all the Chakri kings as Ramathibodi (usually shortened to Rama) in a numbered sequence – Rama I, II, III, and so on. Portraits were made of each, relying on memory for the early monarchs.

Chulalongkorn chose all his seven major wives from among half-sisters and cousins, thus restricting his descent within bloodlines extending from the Chakri founder. He rebased the calendar to begin from the foundation of Bangkok and the Chakri dynasty, and created public holidays celebrating the dynasty's foundation and the king's birthday. Over the last quarter of the 19th century, the monarchy gained financial security, dynastic continuity, and a dominant role in the new government. It made itself into a symbol of the 'progress' associated with the dominant west and the modern world. In the architecture and theatre of the new capital, the monarchy had a dominating presence. Adapting from the Code Napoleon, Chulalongkorn defined the absolute royal power as follows:

The king rules absolutely at his own royal desire. There is nothing greater than this. The king has absolute power as 1) ruler over the realm and refuge for the people; 2) the source of justice; 3) the source of rank and status; 4) commander of the armed forces who relieves the people's suffering by waging war or conducting friendly relations with other countries. The king does no wrong. There is no power that can judge or punish him.³²

DRAMA, ARCHITECTURE, AND HISTORY

While displaying admiration for the west, the elite also felt that Siam needed a distinctive heritage as part of its qualification as a nation-state. Since the start of the Bangkok period, the court had put efforts into retrieving and sustaining the court culture of the late Ayutthaya era, especially drama performances based on stories from the Ramakian (an adaptation of the Indian Ramayana) and the Inao tales (originally from Indonesia). It was *de rigueur* for each monarch to compose dramas based on episodes from these works. During the reigns of Mongkut and Chulalongkorn, classical forms of performance, which had gone out of fashion since the fall of Ayutthaya,

were self-consciously revived – especially the *khon* masked drama – and modernized by adding some western stagecraft. There was also revival of the Ayutthaya court fashion for composing verse in complex metres on mythological themes often drawn from Sanskrit literature. Mongkut and his successors liked to rename places with words from Sanskrit or Pali as these seemed more cultured, euphonious, and *siwilai* than the Thai or Lao of the common people.

This mix of revivalism and westernization appeared in architecture. The Royal Pages School (later Vajiravudh College) was built in 1910 on the model of an English public school, but self-consciously Thai in the buildings' style and decoration. Wat Benjamabophit, the most prominent *wat* built in this era, was an idealized rendering of traditional Thai architecture, with touches of European inspiration in the walls of Carrera marble and the stained-glass windows of Gothic inspiration. The murals were designed by a Thai prince on traditional lines, then executed by an Italian in Renaissance style.

The court also adopted new cultural practice in the spirit of the age, especially social science that reflected the belief in humanity's ability to change the world. Apart from the interest in anthropology noted above, the most popular and important genre was history. Mongkut understood the importance of history in this era fascinated by the idea of progress. He travelled to historical sites, collected historical sources, and compiled a tentative *Short History of Siam*. Chulalongkorn included a celebration of Siamese history as part of the festivals that marked the climax of his reign. The event was staged in 1907 in the ruins of the old capital of Ayutthaya. Chulalongkorn had just returned from his second tour of Europe's historic capitals. In his speech at this event, he noted that well-established countries 'uphold that the history of one's nation and country is an important matter to be known clearly and accurately through study and teaching. It is a discipline for evaluating ideas and actions as right or wrong, good or bad, as a means to inculcate love of one's nation and land'.³³ He found that established countries had compiled their histories back at least a thousand years, and he announced the foundation of an Antiquarian Society dedicated to compiling such a history for Siam. The following year, his son Vajiravudh visited Sukhothai, carrying the text of an inscription found by Mongkut and dated to 1292. He matched monuments mentioned in the text with ruins found on the ground (Figure 5). He published his account of the visit 'to make the Thai more aware that our Thai race is deep-rooted and is not a race of jungle-folk or, as the English say, uncivilized'.³⁴ Vajiravudh and Damrong established Sukhothai as 'the first capital of the



Figure 5: Monarchy mobilizing history. Prince Vajiravudh examines archaeological finds in 1907.

Thai', and the beginning of an unbroken sequence down though Ayutthaya to Thonburi/Bangkok.

In 1915, Damrong squabbled with Vajiravudh and quit the Interior Ministry. He was already engaged in historical research and thereafter it would engage all his energy. After helping to create the nation as an

administrative unit, he now gave it a history. Over the next two decades he produced over 50 studies, including texts, travelogues, and anthropological studies, but overwhelmingly historical works. In 1920, he published the book best known as *Thai rop Phama* (The Thai Wars with the Burmese). It was an immediate success and remains Thailand's most famous history book. It portrays the Burmese as the ever-hostile Other who give definition to Siam as a nation. It pushes the nation back into the past in a series of wars lasting over 400 years. It places the king at the centre of the story, and highlights Naresuan and Yotfa as the heroic defenders of national independence. It lingers on the two sackings of Ayutthaya in 1569 and 1767 as the great national disasters brought about by national disunity, especially within the nobility. It introduces ordinary people into the national story in the tale of Bang Rajan, a village that fought bravely and hopelessly against the Burmese in 1767, with no help from the capital yet inspired by a natural loyalty and marshalled by a solitary Buddhist monk.

Damrong defined the national character of the Thai as seen through history as 'devoted to national freedom, non-violent, and skilled in compromising different interests'.³⁵ Because of these qualities, people of many races had become 'Siamese' by showing loyalty to the king and adopting the Thai language.

COMMONER INTELLECTUALS

The court dominated the opportunities for modern education, overseas contact, and illustrious careers. But it could not totally monopolize them. A small number of talented commoners were able to participate. They were also fascinated by the western concept of progress, but took away rather different inspiration compared to the leaders of the court. Although their numbers were few, through the new medium of printing they gained an audience. Missionaries had introduced Thai printing in the 1830s. Initially, it was monopolized by church and court, but by the 1870s was available to others.

Kulap Kritsananon was the son of a Siam-born Chinese married to the daughter of a minor official. He was educated at *wat* schools and then, because his talent attracted attention and patronage, by tutors on the fringes of the court. He worked for 15 years in *farang* companies, travelling around Asia, acquiring western languages, and falling in love with books. He settled back in Bangkok in the 1880s and was one of the first to start an independent press. He made good enough contacts at court to borrow manuscripts from the palace libraries and had them surreptitiously copied and later printed. He started a journal (*Sayam Praphet*), which

gained a circulation of 1500, for articles on history and culture, which he conjured out of his purloined texts and his own essays on recent historical events. Eventually he was prosecuted, ostensibly for adding his own amendments and inventions into the original texts, but equally for his effrontery in publishing knowledge, which was formerly the secret property of the palace.

Thianwan Wannapho also attracted the court's anger. His parents were commoners with a remote claim to noble ancestry. Like Kulap he was educated in the *wat* and on the fringes of the court. He started trading on the Chao Phraya River, and later ranged further afield to Singapore, but returned to study English and law. He made a reputation as a lawyer for defending the poor, and for openly criticizing the exploitation and corruption of the ruling elite. He was cautioned against such outspokenness, and then jailed for life in 1882 for a technical infringement of legal practice. He was released after 16 years and walked from the jail with a sheaf of writings. He began a journal that railed against forced labour, polygamy, the government's patronage of gambling, and the lack of political representation. Most of all, he questioned why politics was the exclusive preserve of the court. He was fascinated by Japan's success in not only resisting colonialism but also in emulating the western pursuit of 'progress'. He argued that Japan was successful because its self-strengthening was truly a national movement, whereas in Siam the court elite was deliberately exclusive.

Another commoner intellectual, Thim Sukkhyang, came from a family of raft traders. He was educated in the *wat* and gained the patronage of a high-ranking official. In 1878, he published a *nirat* about a military expedition to the northeastern frontier region. The poem charged Chuang Bunnag, who had planned the expedition, with incompetence resulting in military failure and high loss of life. It portrayed ordinary people as victims of the incompetence and corruption of the noble elite. The court ruled that 'the content of the poem was too much for a *nirat*',³⁶ and after a summary trial Thim was jailed and the book destroyed.

Kulap, Thianwan, and Thim came from ordinary backgrounds. Their education came from traditional *wat* schools, patronage at the fringes of the court, and contact with *farang* through involvement in the trading economy. With the foundation of new schools from the 1880s onwards, more commoners wormed their way into elite education. Despite the court's wish to restrict education to the high born, their need for educated people to staff the new administration was greater. Many royal and noble children found the new schooling demeaning or too difficult. Chulalongkorn constantly hectorred and threatened them to participate, but with mixed results.

Prosperous Chinese and other commoner families, however, welcomed the new opportunities. The law, military, and civil service schools soon had large proportions of commoners whose parents were ready to pay the discriminatory fees. While some commoner recruits ascended quickly in their careers, more often they were leapfrogged by those with higher birth and better connections. Especially in the military, no commoners ascended to the highest ranks, but they dominated the middle officer cadre.

Both Thianwan and Kulap *farangized* their names by adding initials (T. S. R. Wannapho, K. S. R. Kulap). Like the court intellectuals, they were fascinated by the idea of people making history, by the concept of the nation-state, and by 'progress'. But where the court thinkers distilled from these ideas a new concept of absolute kingship defending the integrity of the nation and leading the way to progress, the commoner intellectuals were inspired by the ideal of a nation in which hierarchies and exclusions were abolished so that all the citizens could contribute to its progress. Their ideas became the inspiration for a following generation who found that entering a service career was an education in modern knowledge and traditional hierarchy – a potent combination.

THE LIMITS OF SIWILAI

Within the elite, there was debate on what reforms were needed to manage the west. In 1884, as the French took Indochina and the British fought their way into Upper Burma, Chulalongkorn asked Prisdang, his cousin at the head of the Paris legation, how Siam's independence could be preserved. Three other half-brothers of Chulalongkorn in Europe at the time were among the 11 signatories of the reply in January 1885. The danger to Siam, they argued, arose from the west's belief in its own mission to 'bring progress and *civilization* so mankind everywhere is equally content'. A western power would justify seizing a country that failed to provide progress, justice, free trade, and protection for foreign nationals – 'in sum, the ability to govern and develop the country'. They advised:

To resolve this problem, Siam must be accepted and respected by the Western powers as a civilized nation . . . According to European belief, in order for a government to maintain justice it must be based on popular consensus . . . No nation in Europe can believe that Siam maintains justice since everything is decided by the king.³⁷

The memorial recommended cabinet government, paid bureaucracy based on merit, equality before the law, an end to corruption, and freedom of

speech. Most of all, it proposed a constitution, 'so that people, feeling that repression and injustice is at an end, will love the country, and realize that Siam belongs to its citizens'. The memorialists' model was Japan, the Asian country that had begun to emulate the west.

The memorial defined the point where Chulalongkorn's admiration of Europe ended. In his replies, the king argued that Siam's political tradition was different. European monarchs had practised absolutism, triggering efforts to control them with parliaments and constitutions. But the Siamese king ruled according to Buddhist morality. Hence:

In Siam there has never been such a political event where the people were against the king. Contrary to what happened in Europe, Siamese kings have led the people so that both they and the country might be prosperous and happy . . . the people would never be pleased to have Western institutions. They have more faith in the king than in any members of parliament, because they believe that the king more than anybody else practises justice and loves the people.³⁸

Chulalongkorn stressed that he had only just won power from 'conservative ministers', that there were 'no suitable and able people' to man a parliament, and that 'reform' required undivided authority.

Courtiers reinforced this argument by reviving old royal theory and restating it in the new language of nation and state. Phraya Phatsakora-wong, a Bunnag and one of the two non-royals among the senior ministers, restated the idea prevalent from at least Borommakot's time that the original king was chosen spontaneously by the people for his moral goodness: 'our ancestors came together to form a *chat*. This gathering chose from one family a capable man to be the leader of the *chat*. . . This had not been brought about by the opinion of the majority; rather it had been through the leader's own authority'. Another western-educated official portrayed resistance against the French as the defence of Buddhism and urged: 'We must be united to struggle against the royal foe in order to repay our gratitude to the king; we must defend Buddhism from being trampled by the impious; we must . . . preserve the freedom and independence of *chat Thai*'.³⁹

The Paknam Incident of 1893 dramatically increased the elite's fear of a colonial takeover. Chulalongkorn repeatedly stressed the mystical importance of *chat*, and the overriding duty of the citizens to have *samakkhi* (unity), to defend it. In this era, the dissident Kulap was prosecuted, and Prisdang, the royal cousin who headed the 1885 memorial, was disgraced and went into exile. In 1904, Chulalongkorn stated that the king was the embodiment of the nation, that Siam needed 'unity around the middle

path of the king', and that a parliament would only lead to 'additional divisions and conflicts'.

At the very end of Chulalongkorn's reign and thereafter, Damrong redefined the nature of Siamese kingship in a series of speeches and studies. In the past, the king provided protection that allowed the people to pursue the Buddhist path towards *nibbana*. Now the king's role was to bring progress. Both Mongkut and Chulalongkorn had travelled round the country like monks on *thudong* (pilgrimage) to know the people's problems. All the king's actions were devoted to improving the people's well-being. 'The Thai way of government is like a father over a son, as is called in English *paternal government*.' The result was a king 'of the people' and 'for the people', who derived his power from the people's love. Damrong claimed that the new exposure of the royal body, especially through the massive equestrian statue and the innovation of allowing mourners to pay respects to Chulalongkorn's corpse, created a new closeness so that 'people began to have a feeling of love, which had not been felt for a king for a long time. After his death, people were truly sorrowful'.⁴⁰

This style of kingship, Damrong implied, was intrinsic to the Chakri dynasty. His historical studies showed that (non-Chakri) Taksin had failed as a king, as a patron of traditional arts, and as a leader of Buddhism because he did not belong to this tradition. Damrong subtly edited the chronicles of the early Chakri reigns so that it appeared this style of kingship had been practised from the start of the dynasty. He argued that members of the royal family dominated the government because they were educated in statecraft, were devoted to an ideal of service that won popular respect, and were hence able to will their status to their heirs. Damrong's portrayal of royal rule implied that constitutional rule was unnecessary and any departure from Chakri dominance would be a regression. 'If there is no king', Damrong wrote into the chronicle of Chulalongkorn's reign, 'the land will fall into disorder'.⁴¹

CONCLUSION

The last quarter of the 19th century saw massive changes arising from the social strains of the market economy, the new 'bourgeois' mentality of the elite, and the threats and opportunities of contact with the west. Siam avoided colonial rule. In part, this was due to geography and timing: Siam became a buffer between French and British ambitions as the era of colonial land-grabbing came to an end. In part, it was because the Ayutthayan-era practice of absorbing foreigners into the government could be adapted

into a semi-colonial compromise. In part, the Siamese elite embraced the ideas of progress and history, and the technologies of mapping, colonial bureaucracy, law codes, and military conscription.

In the traditional framework, the king's power extended over all 'who sought the royal protection'. The duties of the royal state were to provide shelter against external enemies and allay internal disorder by policing and by settling disputes. The relations that structured the state were all personal ties – the *phrai*'s subordination to a *nai*, the patron–client links within the official bureaucracy, and the fealty of a subordinate ruler or provincial *jao* to the king, expressed in ritual displays, such as drinking the water of allegiance. Tax revenues, forced labour, and exotic goods flowed up this personalized pyramid to support and glorify the upper levels. People transacted with the court on a limited range of matters (tax, corvée, dispute settlement), and mostly through intermediaries, such as the tax-farmer and local recruiting agent.

The new political unit was defined by a territorial boundary. All those enclosed within the boundary, and granted 'nationality', were members of the nation and subjects of the state. The duty of the state was not only to provide protection but also to achieve 'progress'. To that end it built telegraphs and railways, organized religion and education to improve the citizen's mentality, and patronized public health to improve the citizen's physical capability. This extended purpose of the state legitimized an enlarged interference in the life of the citizen. People dealt with centrally appointed officials who taxed, counted, taught, policed, recruited, examined, and much besides. They were submitted to programmes of religious instruction, schooling, and education in citizenship.

In practice, the scope of this new Leviathan was initially limited by funds and human resources to the major towns. Besides, old structures and ideas lingered. Personal connections and family networks remained important both inside and outside the new bureaucracy. Old attitudes of dominance based on social rank were reproduced in the relations between bureaucrat and peasant. But all such survivals now had to compromise with the power vested in the state. The principles were laid, and the reach of the state gradually expanded over future decades. The process was far from smooth. Throughout Chulalongkorn's reign, there were rumours of coups in the capital by both traditionalists and disappointed reformers. Some parts of the Sangha showed quiet displeasure at trends of secularization and westernization. In the outer territories, some resistance continued after the turn-of-century revolts. In Lanna, Khruba Siwichai led opposition to the centralization and standardization of the Sangha down to the 1920s. But

most resistance was passive – exploiting the lacunae of an uncompleted nation-state.

The people were bystanders at the creation of the Siamese nation-state. The territory of Siam was defined as a residual of colonial expansion. The nation was imagined to fit this space and encompass whoever was inside it. The administrative structure was adapted from colonial practice and imposed from above. The creation of the nation and nation-state went hand in hand with an increase in royal power and a reconceptualization of the monarchy's ideological foundations. The nation was conceived, not as an expression of its people in all their variety, but as a mystical unity symbolized by the ruler – an absolutist nation.