1 The Siamese state, society and the world-economies before absolutism

Introduction

The absolutist state, which evolved from the pre-modern state in nineteenth-century Siam, involved radical changes in structure while also displaying many characteristics of its predecessor. Hence, the pre-modern Thai state must be understood in order to make sense of what followed. Most studies have labelled the pre-modern system as the *sakdina*[1] state, the meaning of which is still subject to debate among historians. But most of them maintained that its major elements persisted until the nineteenth century. Some even suggested that they survived the 1932 revolution and continued well into the 1970s.[2]

This chapter argues, however, that the Siamese state during the Ayudhyan period was far from being static and its development was influenced by various world-economies. Moreover, in the early Bangkok period, the Siamese state's contacts with the Chinese world-economy and the European world-economy brought about a long process of state transformation into absolutism. The Thai absolutist state acted as a transition between the pre-modern state and the nation-state which succeeded the fall of absolutism in 1932.

There were many significant developments during the early Bangkok period which marked a departure from the Ayudhyan state. However, we will consider both systems as pre-modern as opposed to the modern state which arose from Siamese absolutism during the second half of the nineteen century. Its modern characteristics include modern bureaucracy and the centralisation of power, elements obviously lacking in the pre-modern state. The chapter has the following sections: the Ayudhyan state; Siam and the Chinese world-economy; changes in the fiscal structure of the early Bangkok state; Siam and the European world-economy; and the impact of the Bowring Treaty on the early Bangkok state.

The Ayudhyan state

The emergence of the Ayudhyan state, in the lower river basins of Siam during the mid-fourteenth century, coincided with the resurgence of mar-

itime trade in the region. Earlier, Ayudhya had been the regional gateway to the Chinese market, and during the fourteenth century there was also increase in trade from India, the Middle East and Europe. This expansion was caused partly by the growing demand of the West for spices and partly by China's increasing commercial involvement in the region.[3]

From a Braudelian perspective, this meant that the European world-economy centred in Venice began to interact with other world-economies elsewhere: the Middle East, India and China.[4] During this period, state formation was occurring in many parts of Southeast Asia. Ayudhya was particularly affected as it was strategically located, commanding a vast rice-growing area as well as being an entrepôt for forest products.

Ayudhya's strategic position as a city port also explains its dominance over other inland centres such as Suphanburi and Lopburi in the lower Chao Phraya basin. Uthong (1351–1369), the first king of Ayudhya, was in effect the king of local lords (*chao muang*), and Ayudhya had the status of city (*krung*) as against a town (*muang*),[5] the appellation of other local centres surrounding it.

Under the Ayudhyan system (as with western feudalism) the king had great difficulty in maintaining a steady flow of resources and keeping control over powerful lords and outlying centres. Initially, the king entrusted members of the royal family with the task of controlling these centres, and the Ayudhyan state at this stage was merely a cluster of power centres linked by personal relationships among the rulers. Soon enough, however, the decentralising process started and these centres posed a challenge to Ayudhya. The Ayudhyan kings relied upon redistribution and other devices such as ideology, state ceremonies, intermarriage with leading *muang* families, the appointment of royal kin to leading positions in outlying regions and warfare to keep the empire together. In spite of these measures, the history of the first hundred years of Ayudhya was plagued with revolts and warfare between the central and peripheral powers.

It was not until the middle of the fifteenth century, after Ayudhya had consolidated power over other centres, especially Sukhothai, another northern centre of power (*krung*) which lay on the overland trade route linking Pagan with the northern part of the Chao Phraya basin, northern Laos and Cambodia,[6] that the formal structure of the Ayudhyan state emerged under the design of King Trilokkanat (1448–1488).

Under the new structure, the centres of the lower river basins such as Suphanburi and Lopburi formed the core area of the Ayudhyan state. They maintained their *muang* status but were incorporated into a central bureaucracy. Beyond the core area, outer *muang* (*hua muang chan nok*) were mostly ruled by local elite who became Ayudhyan nobles. The exception was Phitsanulok which was ruled by a royal prince who was an heir apparent and called heir apparent *muang* (*muang luk luang*).[7] Each *muang* as well as Phitsanulok had its own bureaucracy and Phitsanulok was

allowed to extract resources from its own *muang* and pass them on to Ayudhya in the form of tax in kind (*suai*). The core area and these centres constituted the territory of the Ayudhyan state (*phra ratchaanakhet*).

At the periphery were the small tributary or suzerain states (*prathet-sarat*). They maintained their autonomy, provided a buffer zone between Ayudhya and other kingdoms, and were responsible for paying tribute every three years.[8] This tribute took the traditional form of silver and gold trees.

This state structure was designed to consolidate manpower for three major activities; production, trade and warfare. The central administration created by King Trilokkanat reflects an attempt to create a highly centralised and hierarchical bureaucracy. Immediately below him were two chief ministers: the minister responsible for civilian affairs (*Samuhanayok*), and the minister responsible for military affairs (*Samuhakalahom*). Four lesser ministers also reported to the king; they were those responsible for Treasury and Foreign Affairs (*Khlang*), the palace (*Wang*), the City (*Muang*), and the Land (*Na*). Further down in the hierarchy were nobles responsible for administrative units (*krom*) and sub-units (*kong*). Some of these units had specialised functions whereas most were simply manpower units.[9]

In the Ayudhyan state, the primary role of manpower in the river basins was for production and warfare, and the state also allocated manpower to the ruling class as a means of support. In the outlying areas, manpower provided the state with goods for internal consumption as well as foreign trade. They could also be called up for military service.

The achievement of King Trilokkanat's system was to formalise the social arrangements between leaders and their peasant followers that had existed before the development of the Ayudhyan state, and transform these loose clientships into rigidly enforced ones. All males were incorporated into a single social hierarchy called the *sakdina* system, with each man, except the king, given a place in the pecking order (*sakdina*) starting from a high-ranking prince with 100,000 *sakdina* to a *that* (slave) with five *sakdina*. The state dictated that all male members of the peasant class or commoners (*phrai*) who had a *sakdina* mark of twenty-five must register under a master (*nai*) who was a noble and had a *sakdina* mark of 400 or higher.[10] Every *phrai* subjected to this corvée system had to spend six months a year serving his *nai*, who was supposed to look after the welfare of his *phrai*. Each *nai* was given a number of *phrai* as private property, called *phrai som*, and as manpower belonging to an administrative unit (*krom*) or office (*kong*) called *phrai luang*. Those who submitted tax in kind were called *phrai suai*. The last group of manpower was slaves (*that*), who achieved this status either through debt bondage or as prisoners of war. They had a *sakdina* mark of five. A *that* was considered the private property of his *nai* and had to work full time for his master.[11]

Bonds between the king and the nobles were also based on patron–client relationships which had existed between leaders and followers long before the formation of the state itself. These relationships fulfilled the needs for protection on the part of the followers and for power on the part of the warrior-leaders. The tie between the king and his aspirant noble client was established by an act of homage (*thawai tua*), whereby the son of a noble was presented to the king in order to be trained in the affairs of state, usually in the capacity of a royal page. Once proved capable, he would be appointed to the bureaucracy as a noble in his own right. In his role as patron, the king was the source of a noble's livelihood, and he performed this function, first, by granting his client manpower and when his client already had manpower, guaranteeing it. Second, he granted symbols of power, such as a gold tray on a pedestal or foreign brocaded silk.

In return, the client noble was expected to contribute his resources for the king's use. In time of war, he was expected to supply the king with fighting men under the noble's command. During peace, his men might serve the king in the military or in other state services. Corvée might be substituted for monetary payment, in which case the noble *nai* was responsible for forwarding their corvée payment to the state.[12] Furthermore, the noble client was expected to demonstrate his gratitude to his royal patron by taking an oath of allegiance in ceremonies held twice a year. Anyone absent from the rite was severely punished. That such punishments had to be levied shows how tenuous was the relationship between the king and the nobility in the Ayudhyan state.

Although theoretically absolute, the actual extent of the king's power depended on (and was demonstrated by his nobles' willingness to supply him) with manpower. Thus, in practice, the Ayudhyan kings faced similar problems to the European feudal monarchs: the fragmented nature of the state, the fact that the central administration received resources only after lesser lords had taken their cut, dependence on the co-operation of great families who controlled manpower and strategic territories, etc. After all, the two primary means of accumulating power and resources were through warfare and agriculture. The former was a risky and intermittent business; the latter, given the technology and administrative resources of the day (accentuated by the existing constraints of the supposedly highly centralised state), relied on a trickle-up system that minimised royal take.

One way of overcoming the centre's weakness was by ideological means; emphasising the glory and sacredness of the monarch and the need to obey his will. The Ayudhyan kings relied on two sources of legitimacy: the Devaraja cult and Buddhism. The Devaraja cult, versions of which were exploited widely in the region by states that benefited from maritime trade, justified the king's claim that he was a reincarnation of the Hindu god, Vishnu, and hence could claim absolute power. It was important that the notion of reincarnation be acknowledged by the ruling class who were

always ready to challenge his power, and this was reinforced throughout the year in elaborate state ceremonies.[13]

Buddhist ideology, the other component of legitimacy, was highly compatible with Thai social organisation based on patron–client relationships. One's place in the social hierarchy was determined by the merit accumulated in this and previous incarnations (*bun*). The ten most important virtues that the Buddha practised before reaching enlightenment are called *barami*. The notion of *barami* encompassed the concept of *bun* but included an additional meaning of accumulated merit; it was the privilege of those at the higher echelons of society, close to the king. *Barami* also acquired the social meaning of the ability to bestow patronage.[14] The king, who was portrayed as a reincarnation of the Bhodisattavara (the Buddha's previous incarnation), supposedly possessed the highest degrees of *bun* and *barami*. Accordingly, the king was considered the supreme patron of everyone in his kingdom and also of the Buddhist *sangha*.

Buddhism provided a stronger basis for legitimacy than the Devaraja cult because it functioned in social interactions between patron and client. The extent of the individual's *bun* and *barami* was reflected in the number of his or her entourage. But this strength was also its weakness. Any individual who had high enough social status to bestow patronage was perceived to have *bun* and *barami*. Such an individual posed a threat to the king.

Thus, an ideological claim to legitimacy was not always sufficient; sometimes the king had to resort to playing politics with the great lords. This was particularly prevalent from the sixteenth century onwards, when the growth in maritime trade greatly increased the stake brought about by the arrival of the Europeans. As we shall see, the king's need to play politics with the great lords meant he had to resort to drastic measures. This reduced the credibility of his ideological claim to the throne and caused him to lose control over resources and, at times, over his throne.

By this time the Ayudhyan state has demonstrated the characteristic of the patrimonial state, with a complex administrative staff and conscripted subjects under the personal control of the king. In this system the king made a full claim of his personal authority in spite of the decentralisation of authority.[15]

With the arrival of the Portuguese in the sixteenth century and the Dutch in the seventeenth century, the Siamese state developed further. During the sixteenth century the European world-economy greatly expanded its boundaries to encompass both America and Asia. This was another period of great economic expansion in the region which saw the emergence of Burma[16] as a strong state. A fierce rivalry began between the two states over who controlled the sources and outlets of forest products for the newly expanded maritime trade.[17] The attempt by Ayudhya to gain domination over ports in the Indian Ocean, a major factor in the ongoing conflicts between Siam and Burma for over half a century, ultimately resulted in Burma's domination over Ayudhya in 1569.

Internally, the beginning of the sixteenth century was a period of great political instability. The earlier incorporation of the northern centres into the Ayudhyan kingdom in the fifteenth century proved fatal, as it created a very powerful domestic challenger to the throne. Northern aristocrats provided a usurper to the throne, a collaborator with Burma, that resulted in the fall of Ayudhya mentioned above. However, the northern dynasty also provided a courageous king, Naresuan (1590–1605), who declared independence from Burma.

The Ayudhyan state that emerged in the seventeenth century had a more centralised bureaucracy than earlier. The position of the heir apparent from the town (*muang luk luang*) of Phitsanulok was abolished. The territorial administration became unified and all *muang* were ruled either by local elite who were absorbed into the centre's bureaucracy or by nobles sent from Ayudhya. But outer *muang* still maintained their own bureaucracy, replicating that at the centre.[18] At the same time, the noble class from the north were moved to Ayudhya to serve in the central administration. A massive relocation of manpower from the north also occurred during the seventeenth century. Its initial purpose was for reasons of security, but it also served an economic purpose once Siam began producing rice for export.[19] As a result of the adjustment in the territorial administration and the manpower mobilisation, the central bureaucracy became more extensive and complex. However, the Siamese state was not an absolutist state because it had yet to develop salaried officials who acted in the king's interests. In the midst of economic expansion, it was essentially a patrimonial state. Once political power was consolidated, political conflicts shifted from local centres to the royal court with the growing power of the nobles.

With the growth in trade, high-ranking nobles were permitted to engage in foreign trade which made them richer and more powerful and, consequently, dangerous to the monarchy. Only capable and warrior kings such as King Ekathotsarot (1605–1620) could successfully hold the nobles at bay. In general, the nobles' powerful position and the uncertainty over succession combined to create political instability.[20] With a growing number of foreign traders, princes and nobles tended to form factions with support from foreign communities. King Ekthotsarot was very conscious of fostering foreign trade as well as curbing the nobles' power. He sent the first diplomatic mission to the court of Prince Qrange in 1608. He passed a law that allowed the crown to take one-third of a noble's possessions when he passed away. He tightened control over the *phrai*, and took direct control of those found unreported.

However, these measures did not prevent a powerful *Kalahom* (an abbreviation for *Samuhakalahom*, mentioned earlier), in 1629, from seizing control of the throne from the northern dynasty and becoming King Prasatthong (1629–1656).[21] As the head of a new dynasty, King Prasatthong introduced measures that further enhanced the king's power

and reduced that of the nobles. He extended the monopoly role of the Royal Warehouse Department (*Phra Khlang Sinkha*) in both internal and external trade to such an extent that only small private traders were still able to do business. Many powerful nobles were executed and those who survived were constantly moved around. As in earlier reigns, one-third of the noble's estate went to the Treasury upon his death. The governors of important *muang* were carefully watched at the court.[22] Consequently, the noble class grew vis-à-vis the king's oppressive measures.[23]

King Narai (1656–1688), King Prasatthong's successor, reigned at the height of Siam's participation in foreign trade. His reign also witnessed a struggle between Holland, France and China for regional power. Political development at the Siamese court also reflects this shift in foreign trade. In the early part of the reign, the most prominent court official, a Persian, co-operated closely with Chinese allies in obstructing the Dutch trade in Ayudhya. In 1664 the Dutch imposed a treaty which allowed them to monopolise the trade in deer skins, which were in much demand in Japan, where Siam got copper to buy goods from the Chinese market. Siam was also prohibited from using Chinese crews in their junks, which initially destroyed its shipping. However, the treaty did not significantly damage Siamese trade; the crown's trade monopoly was still in place and the Dutch brought in much-needed bullion in the form of silver.

Phaulkon, a Greek adventurer, became an influential trade officer in the early 1680s. He tried to circumvent Dutch power by attracting the French to provide military assistance to Ayudhya. He lead the French government to believe that King Narai might embrace Christianity and allow the citizens to convert, while also employing Europeans as crown officials, traders and seamen. His influence provoked a conspiracy by Phra Phetracha, the most powerful noble (whose power was based on manpower and support from the majority of the noble class), some Chinese and Japanese traders, to be rid of Phaulkon and depose King Narai in 1688 in a palace coup.

The background of this political development was the Dutch decline and China's ascendancy under the Qing after the end of its civil war (1673–1681). Upon his ascension to the throne, King Phetracha (1688–1703) of the new Banphuluang dynasty rewarded his Chinese supporters with properties and positions in the *Phrakhlang* and allowed his favourite Chinese to dominate foreign trade in Ayudhya.[24] Contrary to what most people believe, King Phetracha was not anti-western; he only acted according to a new power structure in which the Chinese world-economy predominated. In the year he came to the throne, he also confirmed the earlier trade treaty and agreement with the VOC. After all, they were useful in bringing in silver and Indian textiles.[25] The rise of the Chinese world-economy during the eighteenth century in Ayudhya is testified by the appointment of a Chinese as *Phrakhlang* under King Traisa (1709–1733) and the great number of Chinese immigrants as officials and traders until the fall of Ayudhya to Burma in 1767.

Thus, seen from the perspective of the world-economy, the reign of King Phetracha signaled a major turning point in Siamese history. The Chinese world-economy provided the structure in which the Thai political economy operated. This is the next topic we turn to.

Siam and the Chinese world-economy

From the sixteenth century, China, which constituted a world-economy in its own right, became involved with the European world-economy. Since it provided the western market with the desirable key produce of tea and silk, it had started to gain access to bullion from America.[26] It prospered even further from trade with the western world-economy led by Britain from the second half of the eighteenth century, after Britain dominated over the Mughal Empire. The wealth increased its trade volume with Southeast Asia for the traditional imports such as spices and forest produce. Furthermore, this new wealth had a significant impact on China's political economy. China started to produce more cash crops such as sugar cane and cotton for its industry and began to import rice from Siam. It substituted sugar cane for rice and Ayudhya became one of the areas in the mainland Southeast Asia to export rice to China.[27]

The picture above does not correspond to Reid's depiction of Southeast Asia entering the period of crisis in the late seventeenth century and the breakdown of absolutism developed from the fifteenth century. According to him, this resulted from the retreat of the West.[28] However, he was oblivious to the growing importance of the Chinese world-economy. Liebermann who sees greater trade relations in the eighteenth century between China and Southeast Asian mainland states, observes significant economic and political transformations in the latter. Economically, they included new crops, the expansion of internal markets and urban complexes. In political terms, one sees in the major states of Burma, Siam and Vietnam, territorial expansions and the emergence of three major imperial systems. According to Liebermann, between the eighteenth century and the mid-nineteenth century, these states were engaged in many reforms such as taxation, military organisation, and provincial and tributary relations.[29]

It is true that, under the *Banphuluang*, Ayudhya was part of this process, and strains resulting from commercial growth helped to destabilise the dynasty, as argued by Liebermann. As Siam produced for the Chinese market, the struggle for control over the *phrai* among the ruling class intensified since they were producers for the market, and this generally weakened the monarchy.[30] There also emerged many centres engaging in foreign trade, such as Pattani and Nakonsrithammarat, which tried to gain independence from Ayudhya.[31] These are internal factors, apart from the fact that Burma had been at the peak of its cycle of power, which contributed to the fall of Ayudhya in the late eighteenth century.

Seen from the perspective of the world-economy, the political crisis does not matter too much since King Taksin (1767–1782) of Thonburi relied upon trade with China as a basis for the state revival. However, the fall of Ayudhya terminated Siam's role as the rice producer for the Chinese market.

Although the involvement of the Thonburi and Bangkok states in trade was, in one sense, a continuation of the trend started during the Ayudhyan period, it was even more the consequence of the centre's loss of control over manpower that resulted in the fall of Ayudhya. The new dynasty was not in a position to exert command over manpower because King Taksin of Thonburi could not command the allegiance of most of the populace since his sources of leadership had dissipated after the sacking of Ayudhya. Additionally, the former Ayudhyan noble class was much better placed to attract allegiance than the new king, who had come from a wealthy Chinese tax farming family and was previously a governor of an unimportant town.[32] He tried to solve the manpower shortage by encouraging labour migration from China.[33] Although this measure only partly relieved the problem, it helped set the trend of the Chinese influx into Siam which would have many far reaching consequences. King Taksin also imposed an all-year corvée on those *phrai* under his control, a measure which partly undermined his legitimacy.[34]

Being unable to control manpower, King Taksin was forced to depend upon trade in order to establish his power base and revive the Siamese state. He actively rebuilt trade links with China, internally by gathering forest products and then securing external sources by waging wars with neighbouring countries.[35] The wars of expansion during this reign and later in the early Bangkok period have usually been treated in purely political terms – as a product of the drive to dominate and extend royal prestige; clearly, there were also tangible economic reasons.

As a result, trade assumed major significance from the very birth of the new state. The choice of Thonburi, a small village located at the mouth of the Chaophraya river, as the capital facilitated the junk trade of forest products. However, revenue from selling exported goods and monopolising imports during this period "was inadequate which led the king to behave wrongly and eventually to face a rebellion".[36]

King Taksin was removed by his commander-in-chief, Somdet Chaophraya Barommahakasatsuk, a leader able to call upon traditional patron-client ties in the old Ayudhan ruling class. The new ruler took the title of King Rama I (1782–1809) of the Chakri dynasty. He revived a major element of the traditional Ayudhya power base by demanding that all *phrai* become *phrai luang*, (king's men) who owed six months of labour to the state every year.[37] Nonetheless, the Bangkok state failed to exert sufficient control over manpower, and many *phrai* remained unattached. King Rama II (1809–1824) tried to solve this problem first by allowing any *nai* who could encourage masterless men to come under his protection to

register them as *phrai som* (and thus liable for only two months of labour). Second, for every ten *phrai som* under his control, a *nai* was allowed to keep one man as a servant in his own retinue who was of higher status than *phrai som*.[38] This encouraged the majority of the *nai* class to concentrate on gaining control of a large number of *phrai som* which they treated as their private property. Hardly any state dues paid by such *phrai* were passed on to the centre.

This situation made the *nai* increasingly dependent on control of manpower, while the state had to rely principally upon trade as its major source of income. This came at a time when world trade patterns were shifting, driving Siam into greater involvement first with the Chinese and then with the European world-economies. As we shall see, this expanding commerce strengthened royal power vis-à-vis the *nai* class but also decreased the state's role relative to the private enterprises owned by the royal princes and great families in alliance with Chinese entrepreneurs. From these commercial alliances a common interest emerged, the country's economic development and the curbing of royal control of the economy.

Since the fall of King Taksin was partly due to inadequate sources of revenue, Rama I was forced to find new ones. His attempts to squeeze revenues from the current practice of royal monopoly on imports and exports turned Chinese traders away. The king therefore became more actively engaged in the junk trade. According to King Mongkut, King Rama I

> sent out men to look for wood to build up junks and to gather sapan and red wood as well as other forest products to load these junks. He did so by forming a joint venture with Chinese junk traders, making profit from the junk trade to cover year to year expenditure.[39]

The royal junk trade was highly profitable because high-value goods such as ivory, were monopolised.[40] King Mongkut also told us that another major import was Chinese immigrants.[41] There was a continuing influx of lower-class Chinese immigrants during the 1790s and 1800s because of harsh conditions in China and encouragement from the traders who realised the need for manpower to build the new capital at Bangkok. They would soon take advantage of new opportunities offered by the European world-economy.

During this reign, the practice of securing forest products from Siam's neighbouring countries continued. Bangkok became an entrepôt of forest products for the Chinese market. Reportedly, the purpose of Siamese coastal trade with Cambodia, Vietnam and the Peninsular Malay states was to collect produce for the Chinese market.[42] Likewise, produce from Laos travelled by river to Bangkok en route to the same destination.[43]

A major turning point in the Siamese economy came towards the end of the reign when the Kingdom suddenly started growing new products such

as sugar cane, pepper and tobacco, ostensibly for the Chinese market.[44] No convincing explanation has been given as to why China suddenly increased its demand, or why Siam so willingly obliged. A close look at China's economic relations with the western world shows that, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, British country traders previously engaged in trade in the Middle East had arrived in China. Because the East India Company already enjoyed a monopoly of luxury goods such as tea and silk, they had to settle for dealing in bulk products, especially sugar, which Siam was able to supply.[45]

These new items required large-scale production, often by Chinese entrepreneurs and labour. It is noteworthy that the Teochiu Chinese based in King Taksin's homeland, who were pioneers in long-distance trade, originally came from sugar-growing regions of China.[46] The king and the Siamese elite had a fair share of investment in new products, especially sugar. However, it should be noted that the important development of the Siamese economy during the early Bangkok period was due largely to the entrepreneurship and hard labour of the Chinese. The implications of their contribution to the economy will be explored later in the chapter. However, one must keep in mind that the demands of the European world-economy were the main force behind this development.

By meeting the needs of the European world-economy arising in China, Siam played two roles: as producers for the world market, and as traders co-operating with the Chinese to monopolise the very significant trade route between Siam and China. In the first capacity, sugar was the most important item and, in the early nineteenth century, Siam became one of the centres, albeit as a late-comer, in Southeast Asia producing sugar for the world market. An eyewitness report mentions how sugar mills sprung up along major rivers in the central plain.[47]

Changes in the fiscal structure of the early Bangkok state

The way in which the Siamese state became deeply involved with the Chinese world-economy, and indirectly with the European one, had many important consequences for its fiscal and political structures. One was the establishment of the Privy Purse (*Phra Khlang Kang Thi*). When King Rama I started earning additional income from his junk trade, he set it aside in a chest next to his bed, hence the Siamese name "the treasury by the bedside".[48] The Privy Purse was used to pay annual stipends (*bia wat*) to the ruling class. Although the amount was fairly small, it helped consolidate the patron–client relationships between the first king of the new dynasty and the ruling class.[49] When the king refused to increase his *Wang Na*'s *bia wat*, the latter refused to see the king throughout his life.[50]

The Privy Purse was originally considered a convenient new-found source of wealth which was put at the king's disposal, and which could be

disbursed according to his discretion. The annual stipend was the main expenditure item: others included those for religious purposes and buildings. Other smaller conventional sources of revenue continued to go in to the Treasury. The separation of the Privy Purse and Treasury should therefore not be read as evidence that the king's finances were distinguished from those of the state; royal household and government were still intimately related. Nevertheless, this did mark the first step in a very long process by which the royal household and the state separated, as discussed on pages 23–24.

The expansion of production significantly increased shipping business to the advantage of the private local and international traders. Under King Rama II (1809–1824) the royal junk trade was at a disadvantage, according to King Mongkut, because:

> the junk could be wrecked which caused great loss of royal revenue. Besides, those responsible for furbishing the junk used all sort of tricks to embezzle until there was no profit but only loss.[51]

The royal trade could not compete with the expansion of private enterprises and they increasingly threatened the state's ability to raise revenues. As a consequence, the annual stipend was reduced by two-thirds or even half. Towards the end of the reign, white fabric was used in lieu of incomplete payment.[52]

The state's failure to benefit fully from the new sources of income indicated to King Rama III (1824–1850) (the former Krommun Jetsadabodin who, under King Rama II, supervised royal trade and monopolies and was thus an extremely powerful political figure)[53] the need to reform the financial structure of Siamese state. The king noted that, in China and neighbouring western colonies, the main source of state revenue was derived from tax farming. King Mongkut reflected back on his predecessor's actions:

> under King Rama II the royal junk was not as profitable as formerly. This is because the junk trade was greatly expanded and there were many private traders. The royal junk trade was at a disadvantage for many reasons. But if he [King Rama III] were to issue discriminate measures, it would have been beneath the dignity of a great king. Once compared with the practice in China, he came to the conclusion that neither China nor other important countries earned their revenue from junk trade but from taxation in order to develop the country, to pay annual stipend, and to support the army.

King Rama III then consulted the ministers about establishing tax farms on goods, abolishing the Royal Warehouse monopoly and allowing goods to be freely bought and sold. He received their full support.[54]

According to Burney, the British envoy who came to negotiate a trade treaty in 1825, King Rama III signalled a change in the financial structure on the day he ascended the throne. He announced he would not be a king-merchant and maintain monopolies; rather he would permit free trade which meant an abolition of the monopolistic role of the Royal Warehouse.[55] Thus economic imperatives made the king embrace the new principle of liberalism of the time. It should be noted that this change in trade policy was not imposed upon Siam as claimed by many Thai historians. However, he maintained discriminations against western traders, a point to be discussed later.

Since King Rama III was the son of a concubine and not the heir apparent, he needed all the support he could muster to succeed his father and to have these changes accepted. Because of his influence due to his involvement in trade and production, he had the support of the great nobles and managed to bypass the heir, Prince Mongkut, a twenty-year-old prince who chose not to press his claim and instead went into the monkhood for the rest of the reign. King Rama III turned to the ruling classes who staffed the state administration and who, while indirectly benefiting from the expansion of trade by selling surplus and commutation of corvée, had suffered from the reduction in *bia wat* brought about by decline of royal trade. The nobles assumed the *bia wat* had been cut by King Rama II in order to pay the costs of his numerous building projects. King Rama III assured them that he was determined to spend less than a quarter of his father's expenditure,[56] implying that the *bia wat* would be paid in full. King Rama III renounced royal court spending in order to win the support of the ruling classes, and generally projected himself as an austere monarch who, seeking nothing for personal pleasure, indulged only in building monasteries, making merit and giving alms to the poor.[57]

The announcement revolutionised fiscal structures. From then on, state revenue was transferred from external activities, i.e. trade, to internal taxation.[58] Under the reign of King Rama III, thirty-eight new tax farms were established which reflected not only new economic activities but also the general expansion of the money economy due to the contributions of Chinese labourers and the involvement of some of the Siamese peasantry.[59]

The new tax farms can be divided into three categories. The first represented all newly produced export goods such as sugar, pepper, tobacco and cotton which were farmed, taxed from producers and also subjected to export taxes. The second included six items from the former export monopolies such as ivory, sapan wood, red wood, etc. The inefficient revenue-collecting mechanism employed by the Royal Warehouse through the monopoly system was replaced by the enterprising Chinese tax farmers who realised that assiduous collection was in their own interest.

The third category of tax farm arose from the massive influx of Chinese immigrants, of which the majority worked in new forms of production.

The migration produced a huge labour force which stood outside the traditional system of production. Concentrated in the central plains and eastern provinces, it created a big market for food, consumer goods and services. Chinese labourers, having disposable wages, spent considerable sums on gambling and lotteries. The Siamese state, like the western colonial governments, found vice to be a major source of revenue. The Chinese immigrants also presented a potential tax farm for opium which was in great demand. However, this was resisted by King Rama III who projected himself as a model Buddhist king who could not possibly sanction such a blatant vice. As a result, some great nobles benefited personally from the opium smuggling.[60] Additionally, Chinese labourers were significant consumers of food and many other goods such as cooking woks and Chinese sweets, which also became tax farms.

One of the most important consequences of Chinese immigration related to the rice growing economy. Chinese labour's presence in the central area drew the neighbouring Siamese peasantry into the market economy by selling food surpluses, a situation similar to the revival of European towns after the tenth century. By 1837, the involvement of the money economy in rice production allowed the state to commute the land tax to be paid in money rather than, as earlier, in kind (rice). King Rama III was pleasantly surprised to have found a new source of money revenue of 300 catties even after covering all the state's rice needs. The revenue further contributed to the annual stipend payment, and after the embezzlement in the land tax collection was rectified, the revenue increased to 900 catties annually.[61] Apart from the Chinese immigrants, those Siamese peasants who were drawn into the market economy also provided a basis for tax farms on Siamese consumer goods such as dried meat and fish.

Channelled through the Treasury, the new tax system guaranteed the king a steady revenue. During this reign, the annual stipend was paid wholly from the Treasury and no longer from the Privy Purse. King Rama III no longer needed to depend on commerce although, in fact, he continued the junk trade, but in his role as a private entrepreneur rather than as a monarch. He frequently bought farmed goods in the market and paid the same taxes as other merchants.[62] His profits were paid to the Privy Purse, which became well endowed because, according to King Rama V, "he took keen interest in (his trading activities) since he had long experience in the royal junk trade".[63] At the end of his reign, King Rama III had 4,000 catties in the Privy Purse, most of which he passed on to King Mongkut who kept it separate from his own Privy Purse. (Most of the money was used to pay the French following the Paknam Incident in 1893.)

King Rama III had an interest in enforcing the distinction between the Treasury and the Privy Purse and in restricting outside demands upon the Privy Purse. There is no indication that he was aware of how he was furthering the process of separating royal household finances from state

funds. He acted to give himself room to manoeuvre, and he probably would have reintegrated the fiscal system if this had been expedient.

With the increased revenues from taxation, the state was less dependent on the traditional manpower system. Corvée began to be replaced with more flexible and easily mobilised waged labour. Building materials were obtained more efficiently by purchase than by *suai* (tax in kind), because the state could now afford to pay for them.[64] The commutation of the land tax, mentioned earlier, indicates the extent of the money economy.

A monarch's ability to tax has been recognised as an important step to state-building in Europe. But Thai scholars have not adequately addressed this development in Siam. Nithi has perceived, quite rightly, that economic developments during the early Bangkok period contributed towards the modernisation that occurred during the reign of King Chulalongkorn, but he never pinpointed the causal process linking the two periods.[65] As we shall see, this connecting factor was the influence of the European world-economy, dominated by London.

The new fiscal system also caused a shift in the balance of power between the king and the great nobles. Under King Rama II, *Phra Khlang* (Dit Bunnag)[66] and Krommun Jetsadabodin formed a close alliance to reap personal benefit from the royal junk trade and exercise their prerogatives in buying from and selling to western traders. This alliance led to Krommun Jetsadabodin's accession to the throne. As King Rama III, he could not afford an all-powerful great nobility, especially during a time of great economic expansion. To check their concentration of power, King Rama III allocated all-new tax farms to the head of the Royal Warehouse Department, arguing that separating this new source of revenue from the Treasury would make it easier to track how much it contributed to state income.[67] The head of the Royal Warehouse Department, Phraya Sriphiphat (That Bunnag) was a younger brother of the *Phra Khlang*; the king counted on the well-known jealousy and animosity between the Bunnags[68] to prevent the tendency of powerful nobles to challenge the monarch's power.

At the same time, blood and commercial interests put the brothers on the king's side against those whose power base rested upon the control of manpower. This group was led by Chaophraya Chakri who gained a powerful position during the previous reign by winning a war against Cambodia which brought him political prominence and control of booty. The king felt uncomfortable with the powerful ministers he inherited and relied more on the Bunnags and certain high-ranking princes.[69] This divide-and-rule policy allowed King Rama III to partially contain the centrifugal forces inherent in the pre-modern state. Moreover, he was able to use his increased revenue to stop the nobles from uniting against him (for example, by employing Chinese labour instead of insisting the *nai* class fill its quota of corvée labourer). This kept the *nai* class content and enabled him to strike a political balance between the two factions of nobles – those

whose power depended on trade and those whose power depended on manpower.

Simultaneously the exercise of divide-and-rule among the Bunnags turned Phraya Sriphiphat and his clients – Chinese merchants and tax farmers – into a powerful group with vested interests in retaining the existing economic system. They resisted the demand of the European world-economy to change Siam's trading practices and taxation.

Siam and the European world-economy

Although the direct participation of Siam in the European world-economy was sealed by British pressure imposed by the Bowring Treaty of 1855, we have seen that Siam had already started meeting the demands of the European world-economy from the beginning of the nineteenth century. Moreover, since the establishment of Singapore in 1819, Siam had been trading with the West and had not wanted to surrender its increasingly advantageous position in that economy. Siam had quickly become an important trading partner of Singapore, and offered goods both for re-export and for consumption within Singapore and the peninsula. Soon after its establishment, Singapore became the second largest importer of Siamese products. Both factors greatly spurred the development of the Siamese shipping business. Junks from Siam began arriving in Singapore in 1821, and soon thereafter they exceeded the number of junks coming from Cambodia and Cochin-China.[70] Siamese shippers enjoyed a distinct trade advantage: they could sell or buy cheaply in the free port of Singapore, whereas British traders operating from Singapore who wanted to import to or export from Siam were subject to a warehouse monopoly and to various fees and restrictions. What most infuriated the British merchants was that Chinese traders were subject to none of these restrictions. The Chinese were thus favoured because of the mutual benefit developed far back in history.

In 1821 the British made their first attempt to gain a better trade arrangement by sending John Crawfurd to negotiate. He failed to accomplish his mission, in part because he refused to sell firearms and in part because he was not empowered to confirm Siamese rights over Kedah. But most important, the Siamese authorities did not want to change the ongoing situation with respect to their arrangements with the Chinese and were highly suspicious of the British intentions.[71]

The second British attempt to negotiate a better trade arrangement in 1825 by Henry Burney occurred under different circumstances. The British Empire was moving closer to Siam's western and southern borders, and was willing to make significant concessions to Siam.[72] At the same time Siam, impressed by the defeat of the Burmese by the British, was motivated to settle its political differences with England. Besides, the former monopoly by the Royal Warehouse Department had been abolished a year earlier; thus the cause of complaint no longer existed. In the

Burney Treaty, the Siamese government agreed that the British merchants could "buy and sell without the intervention of other persons" and that the import duty would be 1,700 ticals for each Siamese fathom.[73] Under this agreement, Siamese traders continued to benefit hugely from trading with Singapore –partly because of the high import duty against the British and particularly because the British were forbidden to export Siamese rice, the product which became increasingly in demand in the world market.

By the 1840s the international situation had changed: the Chinese world-economy was challenged and later subdued by the European world-economy through the Opium War and the Nanking Treaty (1842). This had a direct impact on Sino-Siamese trade and Siam's declining economic position was reflected in new restrictions aimed at safeguarding state revenues and shipping. In 1842 sugar was subjected to partial monopoly and in 1844 the monopoly became a new tax farm.[74] Although this promised to guarantee the government a fixed income even in hard times, when producers rather than government would carry the cost of taxation, in 1846 the production of sugar was reduced (from a level of 256,000 piculs in 1840) to 150,000 piculs.[75] The monopoly pushed the price up, making Thai sugar less competitive in world markets, and it provoked a new confrontation with the British.

The sugar monopoly highlighted an ongoing problem between British traders and tax farmers of export goods established by King Rama III. In practice, these tax farmers became monopolists in buying and selling the goods they farmed. This was a new form of monopoly which differed from that earlier imposed by the Royal Warehouse Department.[76] However, if the rate imposed by tax farmers was not too high, western traders were willing to accept the situation. This was attested by the number of vessels modelled in the Western square-rigged style. In 1842 these amounted to fifty-five.[77] In any case, in the 1840s this issue was not seen by the British authority to be an infringement of the Burney Treaty but, as we shall see, it would become the central point of contention in 1855.

After China was defeated, British traders in Singapore and India lost patience and those in Singapore lobbied their government via the International Society in London.[78] The Foreign Office then decided that a new mission would represent the Queen rather than the Governor General as in the case of the previous missions. In 1850, Sir James Brooke was instructed to negotiate a new trade treaty according to those made with other "imperfectly civilised states", and demanded the right of residence and worship. Not ranking Siam as their top priority, the British authorities did not expect the mission to be successful and the envoy was instructed not to worsen the existing relationships.[79] However, the Chamber of Commerce in Singapore felt that force should be exercised to make the Siamese accept British demands.[80]

The Siamese authorities were unaware of the conciliatory attitude of the British government and assumed its demand to reduce custom duties

would be drastic, and this dictated their negative posture toward the British envoy.[81]

However, the attitude of the Siamese elite towards the British was divided. This conflict reflects divergences in their economic, cultural and familial interests. It also represents the emergence of some of the forces that would later give rise to Siamese absolutism.

Two younger members of the Bunnag family – Chuang and Kham Bunnag – their father, Chao Phraya *Phra Khlang*, and Prince Mongkut favoured an accommodation with the British. The opposition was dominated by King Rama III and Phraya Sriphiphat, head of the Royal Warehouse Department. Members of Prince Mongkut's party were considered the first westernised members of the elite.[82] Brooke had written in his journal that "the parties may be divided into a King's party and the Princes' party, and it may be generally taken for granted that the Princes themselves and the party adhering to their cause, are favourable to Europeans, whilst the king and the opposite party are opposed to them."[83] In so doing, he implied that the king's supporters were backward and uncivilised.

However sharp their cultural differences appeared, the conflict between the two groups was determined above all by their perception of Siamese (and their own) interests. King Rama III and Phraya Sriphiphat opposed a treaty because they were aware of the British traders' displeasure of the tax farmers' practice of monopoly and wanted to keep the tax farming system intact. They also thought the British intended to dominate the lucrative trade between Siam and Singapore. For example, by 1847 the Siamese nobility was making up to 300 per cent profit by collaborating with Chinese residents in transporting rice to Singapore.[84] British merchants had only restricted access to Siam's rice, and according to the Burney Treaty, the Thais had imposed a high custom duty which reduced the profits from importing bulky goods.

Those opposing the treaty were supported by Siamese nobles and Chinese merchants who benefited from trade with Singapore and who were also tax farmers. According to a western observer:

> It is very well known that China merchants residing in Bangkok have for many years enjoyed an extensive and profitable trade with different parts of China, Hainan, Cochin China, Singapore and the Malay Coast; and they have always been very jealous of the English encroaching too much on this very valuable part of their trade, and these crafty people take great pleasure in doing us all the mischief they can by false and malicious representations to the King and ministers to prejudice them against us, to induce them to keep us out of the country.[85]

These Chinese merchants successfully persuaded most of the Thai elite that China had not succumb to the British and had concluded the Nanking

Treaty merely out of irritation.[86] Indeed, merchants were so upset to learn of the arrival of Sir James Brooke that they contemplated raising a 100,000 baht to fight the British. The description of Bangkok – "The city was in a state of panic, full of men in red uniforms and many boats along the river where the chain barring the river was raised"[87] – shows that the treaty opponents realised their position was untenable.

Those welcoming the treaty were a mixed bunch with mixed motives. The core member was the *Phra Khlang* whose official power was curbed by the control his younger brother, Phraya Sriphiphat, exercised over new tax farms introduced under the reign of King Rama III. However, the *Phra Khlang* prospered in his private capacity as a Siamese who built western-styled square rigged vessels of greater capacity than the traditional junk. These were better protected against the elements, required less of a crew and hence were cheaper to operate. He and his sons continued their trading activities with China and Singapore in the 1840s.[88] It was an open secret that *Phra Khlang* imported opium, a contraband under King Rama III, from Singapore and resold it to the Chinese merchants in Siam at a great profit.[89] Thus he had first-hand experience of how one could benefit from the European world-economy. Furthermore, in the *Phra Khlang*'s capacity, he did his best to obstruct British freedom of trade; this was an activity in which he and his brother, Phraya Sriphiphat, acted in unison.[90] However, he acquired modern technology and, lacking vested interests in the tax farming system, the *Phra Khlang* could be persuaded by his sons to a drastic shift in the direction of the Siamese economy. King Mongkut later described how the *Phra Khlang* was reprimanded by King Rama III for being receptive to Brooke's argument that the new treaty would be signed by the Queen.[91]

The seemingly disadvantaged position imposed by King Rama III on the senior branch of the Bunnags and the acquisition of western technology probably spurred the younger generation of Bunnags (Chuang and Kham) to re-orient themselves towards the western world. They believed that the West, especially Britain, was the force to be reckoned with.[92] They were convinced that, although a trade treaty with Britain would require them to compete with the British on a more equal footing, that should not be an insurmountable problem having had adjusted themselves earlier on. A treaty would also mean a much bigger market for Siamese products. They accepted the British argument that the treaty would spur production and consequently create a wider base for taxation.[93] According to them, the economic basis of the state and the elite would depend significantly on expanding internal production according to the British demand while allowing efficient Thais to have a share in the shipping business.

The young Bunnags' most important ally was Prince Mongkut. Although he had chosen to join the monkhood after being passed over for the throne, his political star was rising. King Rama III had failed to produce an acceptable heir, whereas Prince Mongkut had built up

barami[94] as a monk and leader of the more puritan sect in the Buddhist church.[95] The Bunnags considered him a suitable future king for, like them, he encouraged relations with the West. According to Prince Damrong, after deciding on Prince Mongkut, the two brothers cultivated his friendship by establishing a temple for the prince's Thammayut sect.[96] Judging from his keen interest in western languages and technology, Prince Mongkut was probably sympathetic to opening the country to the West, and given that he spent nearly three decades as a monk, he did not have much bargaining power vis-à-vis the Bunnags.

However, Prince Mongkut was chiefly interested in succeeding to the throne and had no particular commitment to the economic arguments involved. Once king, he confessed to having been perplexed by the concept of free trade, wondering how it would benefit the Siamese authority. He admitted he could see the benefit for Siamese consumers and British exporters, but abolishing the measurement tax would certainly hurt Siamese authority, and creation of the inland revenue would oppress the Siamese peasantry.[97] In any case, Brooke perceived Prince Mongkut as the head of a faction who communicated with the mission "in a private and guarded manner".[98]

Since the king's party prevailed, Brooke found himself stepping out of the official line and began to make many specific demands. He accused the Siamese government of violating the Burney Treaty by exercising monopolies.[99] His proposed treaty aimed at giving the British merchants free access to rice, significantly reducing the measurement fees, and decreasing the number of the monopoly to seven items; which meant that British merchants could at least compete more satisfactorily with the local merchants, if not actually dominate the trade.[100]

Only *Phra Khlang* and Prince Mongkut among the senior elite supported the treaty; the rest of the Siamese establishment saw its interests better served by protecting the status quo. The commercial proposal was rejected on the grounds that it meant "to destroy, to change the fixed rules and customs of a great country which has been established for many hundred years, and to bring them all into confusion and ruin".[101] The king preferred not to make the decision himself, but to push it onto those nobles who were most involved. His side won easily, but he knew well that he was only buying time and that a new treaty was inevitable.[102]

Within a few years the balance between the two groups shifted dramatically. In 1850, King Rama III died and was succeeded by Prince Mongkut, who owed his succession above all to the support of the Bunnag family.[103] The two senior Bunnags were raised to the title of Somdet Chaophraya: *Phra Khlang* (Dit) became superintendent of the whole country and was referred to as Ong Yai; Phraya Sriphiphat (That) became superintendent of Bangkok and was referred to as Ong Noi. Chuang became Chaophraya Srisuriyawong, the acting *Kalahom*; Kham became Chaophraya Thiphakonrawong, the new *Phra Khlang*. Thus the faction supporting the

treaty was now the majority, with Chaophraya Srisuriyawong as the leader of the group that welcomed the new mission. For example, he wrote to Brooke in 1851, informing him that "the new King fully understands the relations of Foreign Nations . . . any intercourse of consultation may hereafter be conducted in an easier manner than before".[104] Chaophraya Srisuriyawong was most likely behind the measures taken to pave the way for the trade treaty: those included the reduction of measurement duties to 1,000 baht, the establishment of the opium tax farm and the granting of permission to export rice with certain limitations.

As king, Mongkut could no longer present himself as a leader of the faction that favoured the trade treaty. He needed to represent all parties concerned. He also adopted his own agenda in ensuring that the treaty would enhance his political position. Hence he was willing to wait until Sir John Bowring had dealt with troubles in China rather than accepting an envoy of a lower rank.[105] Moreover, he wanted to see Vietnam conclude a similar treaty with Britain so Siam would not be seen as succumbing to British influence which might affect its position vis-à-vis Laos and Cambodia.[106] He also adopted a different attitude from the young Bunnags in believing that Siam should accept the British demands in order to negotiate for some concessions from the British.[107]

Those opposing the treaty had lost their most powerful leader, King Rama III, and also found their junk trade with China seriously damaged by the situation in that country.[108] Trade with Singapore and tax farms were their main source of income. Hence Ong Noi (That), who supervised most of the tax farms, became the leader of the group, and he fought hard to safeguard the interests of his faction. The *Kalahom*'s faction tried to placate him by letting him supervise the most lucrative new tax farm, opium, when it was allowed in 1851, yet he refused to give in so easily.

Thus, in 1855, the thorniest issue between Sir John Bowring and the Siamese government concerned the abolition of tax farms on export goods. Although King Mongkut appointed a five-man commission consisting of Ong Yai, Ong Noi, *Kalahom*, *Phra Khlang* and Prince Wongsa who represented the royal family, it turned into a fight between Chaophraya Srisuriyawong (the *Kalahom*) and Ong Noi. This time, Ong Yai also joined his brother in opposing the treaty, probably because he was not altogether convinced of the benefit of free trade. After all, he belonged to the generation which opposed the treaty.

The conflict forced Chaophraya Srisuriyawong to formulate his argument in terms of the interests of the people and Siam, denouncing the tax farms for being oppressive. He assured Bowring that if the envoy really had the benefit of the Siamese people at heart, he should exert his influence on the king "to bring about that radical and necessary change which cannot otherwise be accomplished".[109] This led Bowring to wonder whether Chaophraya Srisuriyawong was a true nationalist or a hypocrite.[110]

Ong Noi fiercely defended his interests by rallying tax farmers to present their cases at the treaty negotiation.[111] He also raised objections about the export of rice on the grounds that Siamese rice production depended upon rain and forest water which was beyond anyone's control.[112]

The agreement on the abolition of certain tax farms only came after hard work on the part of Chaophraya Srisuriyawong and threats by Bowring. Srisuriyawong came into direct conflict with the senior Bunnag over the matter, and tried his best to gather information on the tax farming system for the British mission.[113] Bowring, upon "observing the opposition on the part of Somdet Ong Noi stated distinctively to the Commissioners that a change in the present system was indispensable ... and the he (sic) who opposed the desired arrangement ... would incur the weight of the serious responsibilities connected with the observance of the old stipulations."[114]

Other points of contention between Bowring and the Commissioners included the appointment of a consul which, according to the Siamese elite, might lead other western powers to follow this example. The existence of many representatives of western powers was seen as a threat to internal stability. Chaophraya Srisuriyawong was also concerned about this. The matter was resolved by an agreement that a consul would not be appointed until ten British ships had visited Bangkok after the treaty. The Siamese elite did not consider the extraterritorial right an issue because so few British subjects resided there at the time.[115] As for the king's concern, Bowring promised to extend his mission to Vietnam. Replacing the measurement tax with tariffs also went smoothly. An import tax of 3 per cent was agreed upon, while the export duties were to be levied internally or as an export tax. Monopolies were abolished except for those on firearms and opium which could only be sold to the government and non-Thais respectively.

The Bowring Treaty has been generally seen as the way British imperialism imposed its will on a weak, defenceless Siam, and King Mongkut was doing his best to preserve the nation's independence. As we have seen, this was King Mongkut's position which was publicised by Prince Damrong.[116] There was an element of threat and, unlike the Brooke mission, the British authority was more willing to resort to force.[117] Before his arrival, Bowring had informed the Siamese government that although the British had a large fleet at sea he intended to bring only a few ships to Bangkok.[118]

However, those in the Siamese elite who saw the potential benefits from the trade treaty welcomed the British demands. Their perception and hard work brought about the conclusion of the treaty. The expansion of trade and production provided the basis for the establishment of the absolutist state under King Chulalongkorn.

The Bowring Treaty was instrumental in linking the Siamese economy to the European world-economy. The comparative advantage criteria

decided that Siamese geography was very suitable for producing rice to meet the increased demand from the world market, involving massive labour migration in Southeast Asia. Sugar production, which the Siamese elite expected to piggyback on rice, was not competitive with production from the Philippines and Java, and soon declined.

The Bowring Treaty also brought Siam into the international division of labour. By becoming a rice-growing country, a position which it held until the 1960s, Siam lost its position of a sugar manufacturer and was given the role of the primary product producer. The principle of division of labour also worked internally: the central plains were fully drawn into the European world-economy, whereas the northeast, which had flourished under the Chinese world-economy by supplying forest products, went into decline because it could not serve the demands of the European world-economy.[119]

The impact of the Bowring Treaty on the Thai state

We now turn to the nature of the Thai state after the Bowring Treaty. At its heart lies the issue of the relationship between the king and the great nobles after the treaty. The Bunnags' support for King Mongkut's accession to the throne has been noted, along with his lack of power base during his monkhood. The power of the great nobles grew even stronger, after the treaty, created by linking Siam with the world economy. That the king was a creation of the Bunnags means he had little control over increasing resources of the kingdom. And as we shall see, he remained a client of the great nobles throughout his reign. Thus, we have a situation by which forces of the pre-modern state still existed at a time when the Thai state was initially linked with the world capitalist system, and that link further undermined the power of the king.

King Mongkut's position is clearly shown by a proclamation issued in 1854 giving full authority to Ong Yai, Ong Noi, Chaophraya Nikon, the *Mahadthai* and Chaophraya Srisuriyawong. They had power to issue any order without seeking the king's approval, and he would appreciate being informed of any important decision so that he could act accordingly.[120]

After the Bowring Treaty was signed, a new political arrangement among the Siamese elite was reached, and this is seen in the allocation of the tax farms, the country's most important source of revenue. As we have seen, tax farms under King Rama III were controlled by the Treasury and the Royal Warehouse Department; now they were also meted out to other departments controlled by the great nobles (the *Mahadthai*, the *Kalahom*, the *Krom Tha* and the *Krom Muang*). Under this arrangement, the Treasury had two separate functions: as one of the departments which controlled a certain amount of tax farms, and in its role as the budding Ministry of Finance, collector of all state revenues. Judging from King Chulalongkorn's account, the tax farms under the Treasury remained

within the royal domain; the rest was distributed among the great nobles.[121]

The Bunnags, Chaophraya Srisuriyawong, the *Kalahom* and Chaophraya Thiphakonrawong, his brother (Kham), the *Krom Tha*, enjoyed control over the most lucrative tax farms; they were allocated control over the opium farm (after the death of Ong Noi), the spirit farm of Bangkok, and import and export taxes. King Mongkut's clients, Krom Luang Wongsa, and Chaophraya Phonlathep of the Land Department shared control over sources of the revenue. Krom Luang Wongsa, the king's half-brother, enjoyed a substantial share in the Royal Warehouse Department tax farms, the major earner after the *Kalahom*,[122] whereas Chaophraya Phonlathep oversaw the land tax, an increasingly important tax since Siam started producing rice for the world market. Thus, the powerful elite were satisfied with the increasing resources and the Bunnags' power was checked to a certain extent.

We have already seen that there existed a process of the separation between the king as an institution and as a person. The Privy Purse under King Rama III was considered his personal domain to an extent that King Mongkut did not make a claim on it. Then arose a question of how he should earn his personal income since he lacked King Rama III's aptitude in trade. King Mongkut started his reign with the personal endowment of 100 catties which he tried to augment with private enterprises. When this became difficult under the Bowring Treaty, he turned to the great nobles for help and it was agreed by the elite that the Privy Purse would receive 5 per cent of the tax farm revenue, but this was honoured largely in the breach. King Mongkut relied mainly upon his grateful client Chaophraya Phonlathep of *Krom Na* who held his position through support from the king, and who went above the 5 per cent agreement by forwarding the flat rate of 2,000 catties annually to the Privy Purse. The remaining contribution to the Privy Purse was another 2,000 catties, and when the *Krom Na* was replaced by Phraya Ahanborirak, Chaophraya Srisuriyawong's nephew and client, the king also lost the 2,000 catties contribution.[123]

The great nobles apparently considered the tax farms under their control as their own property and used every opportunity to limit their payments to the Treasury. They deemed it right to pay only a fixed amount of revenue to the Treasury regardless of the fact that bidding for the farms had increased over the years. Even Kromluang Wongsa, the king's half-brother who was given the Royal Warehouse Department, did not act any differently from the other great nobles.[124] This probably explains why King Mongkut prohibited any of Wongsa's offspring to be ordained in his Thammayut sect.[125]

As a result, both the Privy Purse and the Treasury suffered at a time when the Siamese economy was expanding. According to King Chulalongkorn, during the last years of the reign, the annual stipend was barely covered. When King Mongkut died, he was not aware of his personal

fortune and instructed that his cremation should be paid from the Privy Purse. This caused the Privy Purse to owe a huge sum to the Treasury, which it took over ten years to repay.[126] Thus, it is safe to conclude that the great nobles benefited the most from the economic expansion.

One reason the resources were controlled by the great nobles arose from the fact that, from the very beginning, the king was forced into being a client of the great nobles rather than their patron. Evidence suggests that soon after 1855 King Mongkut might have attempted to check the power of Chaophraya Srisuriyawong. The *Kalahom* claimed to a British envoy that he had been out of royal favour because of the fall in revenues and the terms of the treaty which were inferior to those which the Japanese had succeeded in obtaining from Britain.[127]

The king thus inadvertently alienated the man who would become the most powerful person in his reign, for although the treaty did destroy Siam's independent trade and subordinated it to the West, it also brought a great number of productive forces into contact with the European world-economy. These ultimately contributed far more revenue to the state than it had in the past; already under King Mongkut the revenue from excise taxes expanded and the number and size of tax farms on consumer goods and services increased.[128] These changes laid the groundwork for the transformation of the Thai state from a pre-modern to an absolutist state. In the meantime, the great nobles and their tax farmer clients simply enjoyed their privileges at the expense of the state.

Under King Rama III, the revenue for the Privy Purse came largely from his private enterprise and was kept separately from Treasury revenue for his own benefit. The precedent of having the royal expenses come only from the Privy Purse and not from the Treasury was re-emphasised under the strained financial circumstances of the reign of King Mongkut, who took great care to point out that the money spent on his family and on making merit came from the Privy Purse and not from the Treasury.[129] This helped to lay the foundation of private property in Thai society.[130] Furthermore, once the monarch had no claim on the Treasury, his person was well on its way to becoming separated from that of the state.

During King Mongkut's reign, the form and financing of the state resembled the old, even as they increasingly took on the characteristics of the new. The king's style and ideology reflected this ambivalence as well as the problems he faced in dealing with traditional and modernising forces from a position of weakness.

Although King Mongkut's administrative proclamations give the impression that he was active in state matters, the fact that the great nobles did not regularly attend the daily royal audience suggests that he was not at the centre of administrative power.[131]

The king's writings indicate that he was the centre of neither symbolic nor administrative power. State and royal ceremonies, which supposedly functioned to reinforce the link and hierarchy between the monarch and

the nobility, became demonstrations of royal weakness because the great nobles did not attend.[132] The king responded by de-emphasising the importance of such rites. Thus, when holding a tonsure ceremony for Prince Chulalongkorn, his son, he assured the nobles that he did not expect them to make contributions, but if they chose to do so he would return the favour in due time.[133] By emphasising reciprocity, he was no longer acting out the traditional monarchical role of supreme patron.

He openly conceded his role as the client of the nobles responsible for putting him on the throne, to whom he felt a deep sense of gratitude. As such he greatly needed their support. When his coat of arms was insulted because it was said to belong to an old and powerless king, he begged them to rally around him and attend the ceremony of *tham khwan* (calling back the guardian spirit).[134]

King Mongkut's efforts to assert royal authority in his relationships with the nobility were largely limited to emphasising face-to-face contacts. Thus he ordered that members of the ruling class come to receive the annual stipend from him personally instead of sending representatives. He presided over the ceremony of drinking water of allegiance and took an initiation to make a vow to be true to the ruling class.[135] He personally signed and presented the documents certifying the promotion of royal princes at their own palaces. He encouraged the lesser nobles to inform him of any ceremonies they arranged, so that he might make a contribution with a view to future reciprocity.[136] But his patronage resources were limited, as can be seen by his offer to the nobles of the services of the royal masseuses.[137]

King Mongkut also attempted to strengthen the royal image among the general population by emphasising the role of the monarch as the source of justice and the people's well being. He took up the role of crusader for justice – understandable, given that his real power had been stripped away by the great nobles, and that by attacking abuses of state power he effectively attacked them. In trying to include orders and proclamations "so that nobody would claim arbitrarily", he issued a proclamation prohibiting those who aspired to be town governors from attempting to win office by bribery. He reasoned that once they had achieved their ambitions they would use their positions to seek benefits that greatly exceeded the value of what they had paid out, and would thus oppress the people. The language of the proclamation was harsh; those who resorted to bribery were compared to a vampire who sucks the people's blood.[138] The people were encouraged to present petitions to him directly, and details on how this could be carried out were elaborated. They were even promised money to cover their expenses.[139]

The king also addressed himself to tax farming, another source of popular oppression and hardship. As a monk, Prince Mongkut had travelled extensively and understood how much the people hated tax farmers; his expressions of sympathy with their plight had made him a very popular

candidate for the throne – at least from his point of view.[140] The problems he faced as monarch forced him to approve even more tax farms as the Thai state moved to a total reliance upon internal sources of revenue, but he found a way to reduce the potential for abusing the system. Tax rates were published in the *Royal Gazette* so the people could know the limits of their tax obligations, and, should the tax farmers become oppressive, the people were told what steps they could take to complain. They could go so far as the king himself, should the ministers fail to take action.[141]

By stressing the image of the monarch as a fighter for justice and the well-being of the common people, King Mongkut brought about an important development in state ideology. The dialogue between monarch and the ruling class gave way to a dialogue between the king and the lower strata of society – at least those who were literate and who lived close enough to the centre of power. The references to the happiness of and justice for the people remind one of the European Enlightenment. This change laid the foundations for the major shift in legitimising principles that occurred in the next reign.

Western influences were largely responsible for this drive to ideological change. Since the collapse of China and Siam's subordination to the western world order symbolised by the Bowing Treaty, the Siamese elite could not escape the ideological challenge posted by the West. Suddenly Siam felt itself to be measured against a "civilised" order – "civilised" meaning complying with western ideas. Thai social organisation, culture and worldview were scrutinised, with polygamy and slavery becoming sources of particular embarrassment.[142] The Bunnags also faced up to the challenge posed by western thought and produced a scientific explanation for the most important Buddhist treatise, the *Tri Phum Phra Ruang*.[143] This perception of the world order was reflected in the new term, *siwilai* (being civilised).

The concept of "being civilised" was defined in different ways as we shall see, but when it first appeared it was closely related to the world-economy. King Mongkut described Siam as "half civilised, half barbarian", noting that whereas the noble class of more backward neighbours such as Laos and Cambodia depended entirely upon the manpower system, the nobility of Siam were also sustained by the *bia wat*.[144] Since the *bia wat* derived from trade and taxation, it seems likely that by the middle of the nineteenth century the Thai elite understood "being civilised" to mean that control over labour was no longer the basis of power. The elite began to perceive the manpower system as something backward and barbarian.

The conception of "being civilised" co-existed well with the western-inspired notion that a free peasantry would become more effective producers for the world. It is therefore not surprising that King Mongkut started contemplating the abolition of slavery.[145] As in previous Bangkok reigns, the corvée system no longer effectively served the state: the noble class controlled most of the unfree labour, and work obligations were

extensively commuted for cash. The main difficulty for the monarchy was finding money to pay labour costs and compensating the noble class; this could only be possible when the economy was better entrenched in the European world-economy and revenue from taxation could be used. It was left to King Mongkut's son, King Chulalongkorn, to take on the task of changing the basis of power in the Thai state. He could do so because the Thai state had come a long way since the fall of Ayudhya, in terms of both structure and ideology. Even the post-Bowring changes, which would seem to impel the country away from the modern order – the return to reliance on domestic sources of surplus and the loss of the royal power to the nobles – were a spur to change rather than regression. Siam had become too involved in a market economy and a world of thought dominated by the West to remain a patrimonial state based on command of labour. New solutions had to be found, and in the next reign they would result in the establishment of royal absolutism.