

Conclusion

This book has examined the transformation of the Thai state and society from the nineteenth century to the twentieth century. This period saw the emergence of an absolutist state under King Chulalongkorn, which has been defined here as a centralised state with a modern bureaucracy designed to give the monarch direct access to the population and national resources. Before this time the Thai state had been anything but absolute, and the concept of absolutism can only be applied to the Thai state from the late nineteenth century to 1932. Even then, the term cannot be taken literally. Absolutism typified only the initial state in the long-term process of centralisation, and not the culminating years. In the Thai absolutist state, the monarch, armed with a modern bureaucracy, increasingly made claims on sovereignty, and the term does not reflect his real power, which was by no means all-encompassing.

I have studied the Thai state and society from the formation of the Ayudhyan state in the mid-fourteenth century up to the last reign of the pre-modern state in the mid-nineteenth century. It demonstrates how Siam's interactions with various capitalist world-economies were significantly responsible for social and state development. In other words, I have argued that world-economies moved Thai history in the pre-modern period. In terms of state formation, they were responsible for the rise of the Ayudhyan state in the mid-fourteenth century. However, it remained a pre-modern state or a "patrimonial state" until Siam's economy was linked with the European world-economy in the nineteenth century.

Therefore, I disagree with Reid's argument that the "Age of Commerce" turned Southeast Asian states, including Siam, into absolutist states in the fifteenth century.¹ It is true that during this period the Ayudhyan state became more consolidated with the emergence of the central bureaucracy. However, this bureaucracy was disqualified from being a mechanism of an absolutist state on two counts. First, its parameter was restricted to the central area where the king's power was effectively exercised. Elsewhere, regional centres of power, or *muang*, had their own bureaucracy replicating the centre at Ayudhya. This means the centre's power was limited and the state could not exercise direct control over all

areas claimed to belong to Siam.² As such it fits into Wolters' description of "mandala states".³ Second, its ruling class had yet to be salaried, an important criteria of an absolutist state which theoretically guaranteed that they would act in the interest of the monarch and did not live off their positions in the bureaucracy, a major characteristic of feudal and patrimonial states.

In this book I have shown that it was Siam's contacts with the European world-economy, led by Britain, that provided necessary conditions for the emergence of absolutism. They included a sufficient number of the populace being involved with the world economy to constitute an adequate basis for taxation. Another important factor was the determination of the monarch to exploit opportunities offered by the world economy in order to rise above the power of the great nobles; and this was done in Siam not by wars, but by the seizure of control over tax revenues. I have shown that, at first, Siam's interaction with the world economy occurred with its conclusion of the Bowring Treaty with the British. This triggered an even stronger trend of patrimonialism whereby the great nobles appropriated most of the newly created resources from the monarch. The economic requirements of the world economy, and the king's lack of power, set the stage for a major transformation – into an absolutist state.

In this respect my book differs from most scholars whose works are concerned about the transformation of the Thai state. In general, they attributed the transformation of the Thai state to either external or internal factors.⁴ Instead, my book looks at the interaction between the world economy and internal agents.⁵ I have identified those agents to be a group of modern elite from the ruling class rather than the king. However, it was the second generation of the Thai monarch who was determined to turn new economic opportunities to his advantage.

The second major argument in this book is that the fall of absolute monarchy in 1932 was caused by inherent structural weaknesses of absolutism. I deliberately end my study in 1912, the year when the first challenge to absolute monarchy was staged. In so doing the economic recession in the 1930s, and other related factors could be clearly seen as precipitating rather than inducing the fall of absolutism.

As in the case of the rise of the modern state, I argue here that the Thai case should be seen in the context of Southeast Asia, and not treated as unique. Modern education was introduced in all countries linked with the European world-economy. Hence, the rise of the new social class, comprising of members of the old elite and those outside the ruling class. This is because attempts by authorities, foreign as well as native, to keep access to modern education exclusively to the ruling class failed. Everywhere new men flooded the education system and, subsequently, the modern bureaucracy.

Although coming from different social backgrounds, the modern group

of Southeast-Asian bourgeoisie formed a distinct social class with a new culture that was cosmopolitan, western, modern and meritocratic. Being the first and second generation children of the great social transformation, their expectations from the evolving political structure were naturally high. When the aspirations were not matched by reality, because the top echelon of the modern bureaucracy was dominated either by members of the colonial powers or, in the case of the Thai state, by members of royalty, dissatisfaction multiplied. The source of dissatisfaction also came from clashes of imbedded old social values with modern ones, which were part and parcel of the modern education system.⁶

They then turned to the modern ideology of nationalism, the product of the time and, in the case of Siam, the creation of the monarchy to provide an ideological basis for Siam's involvement in the world economy as well as the newly built absolutism. In the name of "nation" they sought to fulfil their demands for political change in institutional systems borrowed from the West, which promised wider political participation in the political process.

As we have seen, the Thai case demonstrates a very early expression of nationalism in the late nineteenth century. However, it involved the very top echelon of the Siamese elite who were the first generation of modern bureaucrats. They perceived the absolutist state, which was in the process of being created, to be detrimental to their interests. They exploited the perceived threat of imperialism as a pretext for claiming an enhanced role for themselves. Their activities demonstrate the genesis of liberal nationalism among members of the elite who were seeking better roles for themselves in changing the political structure. They definitely did not represent the official state ideology. However, they shared a motive similar to the bureaucratic bourgeoisie of the next generation.⁷

From the argument above, it can be seen that I argue against another conventional wisdom that states that Thailand did not experience a nationalist movement as in other Southeast-Asian states. We have seen in Chapter 6 that agitation among young army officers was expressed in the name of nationalism in a similar way to other urban-based nationalist movements in the region. However, the difference lies in that fact that, in Siam, popular movements did not participate in this urban nationalist movement as in the Philippines, Burma or Vietnam.

This relative lack of popular participation in Siam arose from the way in which the country was integrated into the world economy. As we have seen, Siam was a late-comer as a producer for the world rice market, but this is not the main reason. With two other major rice growers, Burma and Vietnam, one sees the capitalist development of rice production itself. There developed a large-scale land clearance and institutionalised credit system which consequently led to complex social stratification of the landowning class, big and small peasant holders and labourers, as well as money lenders.⁸ The social dislocations could not withstand the world

recession in the 1930s and popular movements heightened protests against authorities, or colonial powers.

In the Thai case, it appeared initially as though the Thai state was following a similar pattern of comprehensive integration into the world economy. A major irrigation project in the Rangsit area, which was developed by a private company belonging to a political ally of the king, was launched in the late nineteenth century. However, King Chulalongkorn did not approve other projects and this left Thailand to pursue the path of development similar to that of France, where small peasant holders were seen as the backbone of the French absolutist state. In the case of France, this was meant to keep the peasantry as the basis of taxation. It is not certain that King Chulalongkorn entertained a similar motive, but judging from his earlier bitter fights with the great nobles, it is unlikely that he would welcome the development of a landowning class that might undermine his power in the long run.

The last question is how far the fall of the Thai absolutist state fits into the existing literature on social revolutions, especially works by Theda Skocpol and Barrington Moore.⁹ At first glance it appears that Thailand does not fit into the theoretical framework since it did not experience a social revolution as in other societies studied by Skocpol or the transformation from agrarian to industrial society as analysed by Moore. However, at the core of social revolutions was the fall of the ancient regime, of which absolutism predominated. In this respect, the fall of Thai absolutism could fit into the debates. What is missing in the Thai case is the capitalist development, which in other societies precipitated social revolutions or major transformations.

My comparative study of the English and the French revolutions shows that, in both cases, there existed inherent contradictions within their absolutism. They arose from the way in which allies had to be found and certain compromises had to be made by the king who intended to create an absolutist state. The Tudor monarchy found their allies in the gentry who were allowed to expand their landholdings from the sale of the church's lands at a bargain price. The landowning class was the main force in parliament fighting to curb the power of the king. The French monarch was engaged in a long process of creating a modern bureaucracy from the bourgeoisie who, sooner or later, developed their own vested interests which differed from those of the monarch. The need to raise revenues for war also forced the monarchy into selling positions in the bureaucracy which, in the long run, undermined the state's ability to raise revenue.

I have also found that the capitalist development of these two societies also differed. England was far more advanced in agrarian and commercial capitalism, and its "glorious revolution" was an outcome of conflicts between the king and the capitalist class. In France, the revolution was started by the king's bureaucrats who tried to block an attempt to reform, which meant the end of the noble class's privileges. Only after the revolu-

tion began did other groups openly oppose the ancient regime. In many cases their dissatisfactions stemmed from involvement with capitalism.¹⁰

The above study leads me to conclude that the inherent weakness of Thai absolutism, as found in other absolutist systems, were responsible for its failure in Siam. Social conflicts arising from the spread of capitalism, which led to social revolutions in France and England, were absent in Siam. The lack of popular participation in the 1932 revolution in Siam was due to the way in which the main production force was outside the capitalist system. Thus, although Thai absolutism was created in relation to the world economy, it simply fell on its own accord.