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Peasants, merchants, and officials, 1870s to 1930s

The nation-state was new. So too were its citizens, as a result of two sweeping social changes. Beginning in the early 19th century, the landscape and society of the lower Chao Phraya basin was transformed by a frontier movement of peasant colonization. Uniquely in Asia, new land was being opened up faster than population growth from the mid-19th century right through to the 1970s. As a result of political decisions in the late 19th century, this frontier society was characterized not by landlords but by peasant smallholders. Until urbanization accelerated in the last quarter of the 20th century, this smallholder peasant society represented four-fifths of the population and was the main driving force of the economy.

Much of the urban population was also new, especially in the capital city of Bangkok. Continuous immigration from southern China made Chinese a dominant element in the city's economic life. Western merchants and advisers formed a new semicolonial segment of the elite. A fledgling commoner middle class began to form around the city's new role as capital of a nation-state.

TRANSFORMING THE RURAL LANDSCAPE AND SOCIETY

Europeans who visited Siam in the 1820s thought much of the Chao Phraya delta was a 'wilderness'. Plains of scrub forest inhabited by wild elephants merged near the coasts and rivers into marshes dense with reeds and teeming with crocodiles. Settlements clung to the banks of the main rivers. Even along the Chao Phraya River from its estuary past Bangkok and into the upper delta, most of these banks looked 'deserted' and densely wooded (Figure 6). In the Ayutthaya era, the only extensive tract of rice cultivation had been the narrow corridor of floodplain running south from Chainat in the centre of the delta. Here farmers grew floating rice on the annual monsoon flooding. Even after the economic expansion and exports to China in the early 19th century, rice cultivation was still largely confined

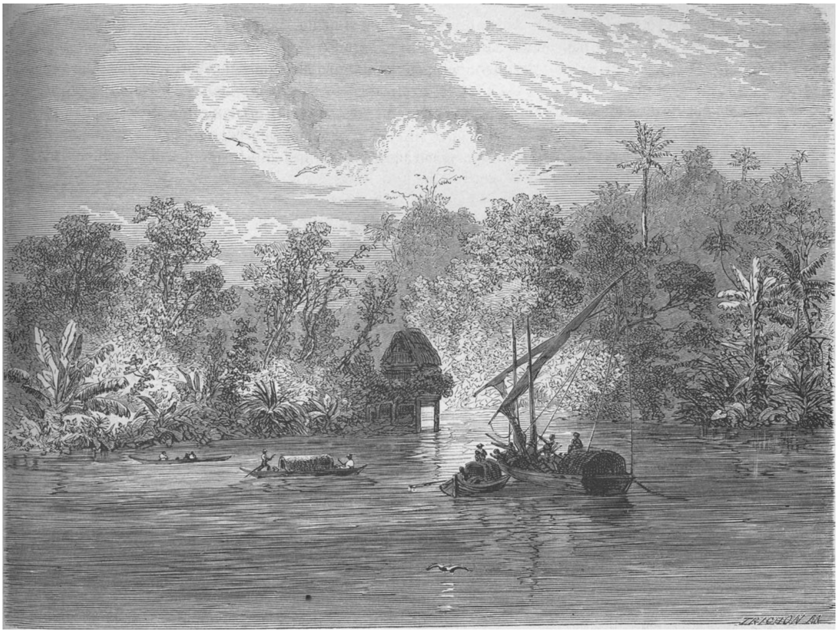

Figure 6: Before the rice frontier. As sketched by Henri Mouhot in 1858, the banks of the Chao Phraya River were still dense jungle.

to this tract. Around 1850, three-quarters of the delta's land area was still unused, and the total population of the Chao Phraya delta region (or 'central plain') was probably around 500 000 people.

On average each year over the next century, another 7000 households settled in the delta region and brought an additional 200 000 rai (32 000 hectares) of land under the plough. By 1950, the triangle from the head of the delta to the coastal salt flats 250 kilometres to the south had become a lattice of canals with almost every square inch of land under cultivation.

The transformation of the delta landscape began in the early 19th century when immigrant Chinese brought expertise in growing vegetables, pepper, sugar, and other crops. From the 1810s, more Thai began to slip away from traditional controls to this agrarian frontier. At first they grew mainly sugarcane but in the 1870s sugar exports collapsed because beet-sugar in Europe and Dutch colonial sugarcane production in Java were more cost-efficient. From then, rice became the major crop and major export. The growth of cities and plantation populations in colonial Asia created a rapidly growing demand for food. The cheaper freight costs of western steamers made it more economic to transport such bulky crops. Rice exports averaged around 100 000 tons a year in the 1860s, and five times that amount by the turn of the 20th century.

The early expansion of frontier settlement took place along the raised areas at the eastern and western fringes of the delta, and along canals built as highways across the delta in the 1820s and 1830s. From the 1860s, the king seized on canal building as a way to create landholdings as support for the rapidly growing number of royal kin. The king cut several new canals and parcelled out the land along the banks, mainly to royal relatives. Big noble households copied the strategy. The Bunnag family built a major canal to the west and several other big households invested in smaller projects. In the 1890s, the royal-related Sanitwong family launched the largest of these projects to drain 1.5 million rai of the Rangsit area to the northeast of the capital. The king took a share. In these canal projects, the banks were allotted in large plots of 1500 to 3000 rai apiece, often worked by the nobles' supplies of tied labour. People migrated, especially from the Khorat Plateau, to work as tenants and labourers in these new rice lands.

The government passed a land law that granted full property rights based on a cadastral survey and title deeds. Land prices in the Rangsit project jumped from 5 baht per rai in 1892 to 37.5 baht in 1904. Several royal relatives petitioned to launch yet more such canal schemes. One of Chulalongkorn's half-brothers noted that 'of all the enterprises in which Thai of good positions can at the present invest their money, it is difficult to find any as promising as trading in land, and of the various types of land none is as profitable as rentable rice land'.[1]

But this trend towards landlordism collapsed around the turn of the century. Sugarcane lent itself to large-scale plantations, but paddy was more suited to smallholder cultivation. The settlers who moved into the canal tracts were used to having occupancy rights and not used to landlordism. Many new landlords had no experience of managing land. By the 1890s in the Rangsit tract, 'there is a dispute about almost every holding'.[2] Communities organized local *nakleng* toughs to keep rent and tax collectors out of the village. In reply, landlords hired bands 'armed with guns, cutlasses and other arms' to drive settlers off the land.[3] The Rangsit project office had to be defended by gun emplacements.

The king decided to halt the development of a landed nobility. In the 1870s, as he began to attack other bases of the power of the great households, Chulalongkorn instructed officials to allot land on new canal projects to peasant families, and to reclaim land that big landlords failed to cultivate. He refused permission for new canal projects – first, those planned by other noble households, and then, after 1900, those planned by royal kin as well.

Peasant colonization had already begun to expand in areas away from the canal tracts. From the 1880s, as more people escaped from labour bondage, the pace increased. No attempt was made to extend the new land property titling to these areas. Instead, officials evolved a practical system of allowing settlers to *jap jong*, stake a claim to empty land, and gain a certificate of occupancy right as long as they brought the land into cultivation.

The task of draining the swamps for cultivation was removed from private enterprise. A Dutchman, van der Heide, was hired to prepare a massive drainage and irrigation scheme covering the whole delta. His 1902 plan was shelved on grounds of cost, but the government's Irrigation Department launched smaller schemes that gradually over following decades covered the whole delta with a lattice of canals. Settlements followed the engineers, putting 10 million rai (1.6 million hectares) under paddy in half a century.

The first phase of expansion was confined to the Chao Phraya delta. After railways were built to Khorat in 1900, Chiang Mai in 1921, and Khon Kaen in 1933, export demand sparked colonization around these railheads, bringing an additional 180 000 rai under paddy each year. As around Bangkok, some land was acquired by landlords. In the northern valleys, the old ruling families grabbed land to compensate for their loss of control over the state revenues and forests. Some drove peasants off the land by releasing rampaging elephants or spreading rumours of witchcraft. Some built irrigation systems to bring new land into cultivation. Around the railheads in the south and northeast, old ruling families, village chiefs, and a few successful merchants and tax-farmers acquired large landholdings by similar strategies.

But most of the expansion was carried ahead by peasant settlers released from labour bondage. Above Chiang Mai, they repopulated areas abandoned in the 18th century. In the northeast, they spread along the Chi-Mun river system. In the south, they cleared the broad basins between the mountains and the east coast of the peninsula. By 1937, only a quarter of the land in the central plain was under landlords and the remainder was occupied by smallholders. In the north, the landlord proportion was a fifth, and in the northeast insignificant.

The rice frontier created a small landlord elite, but its main effect was to turn the new citizens of the Siamese nation into peasant smallholders.

SMALLHOLDER SOCIETY

The rice frontier changed not only the landscape, but also the social geography. Previously, most people lived clustered close to a *mueang* centre. Now they spread across the landscape as villages sprang up along the waterways throughout the paddy tracts. People also became more mobile. In the early years of the frontier, settlers came from all directions. One village was settled first by migrants from the hills, then by another group from upland plains, and later by people from coastal areas down the peninsula. For security, households often moved and settled in groups, generally related by kin. Many households moved several times in one generation. The practice of the monkhood changed in response to this new social geography: some monks left urban *wat* and circulated around the countryside, staying only for the annual rains retreat in a fixed place. As villages became more permanent and well off, they built a *wat* and invited these itinerant monks to stay.

Although most villages were newly established, that did not mean they lacked a heritage or distinctive culture. Indeed, the strength of village culture arose from its ability to survive such disruptions through communal cooperation. Most villages had a tutelary spirit, usually the ancestor-founder, often represented by a post, rock, or tree at the centre of the settlement. Spirit rituals encouraged cooperation, disciplined dissidence, and promoted the unity and independence of the community. As early travellers into the rural hinterland found, the first reaction of villagers to the approach of anything that might be official was to flee into the forests to avoid being conscripted for forced labour.

Villages on the rice frontier had a degree of economic independence also. Farmers worked with simple tools they fashioned themselves from wood, with a little help from a local blacksmith. Cattle bought from pedlars were the only major investment. Most farmers broadcast rather than transplanted paddy, and chose varieties that could grow quickly during the rising annual flood. Use of fertilizer was almost unknown. The yield per rai of this simple regime was very low. But, because of subtropical conditions, the natural fertility of river silt, and plentiful land, the yield per person in the Chao Phraya delta was higher than anywhere in Asia, even intensively cultivated Japan.

The natural environment also supplied other foods (fish, vegetables, fruit), the raw materials for tools and housing, herbs for medicine, and household fuel. The seasonal rhythm of monsoon paddy cultivation coexisted easily with a regime of supplementary hunting and gathering for these items. Production was organized on a household basis, with traditions of exchanging labour, especially for harvesting and house building. These communal projects were also excuses for festivity and occasions for courting.

Men and women shared work on the land, including ploughing (Figure 7). During the agricultural off-season, villagers took surplus and specialist products to trade with neighbouring villages and across the ecological boundaries between hills, plains, and coast. Many of these petty traders were women. So too were most of the barge-owners who transported rice along the waterways. In the 19th century, female slaves commanded a higher price than males because 'the woman is decidedly as a worker worth more than the man'.[4]

The production system was highly geared to self-reliance. Visiting the far northeast in 1906, Damrong exclaimed: 'Villagers around here make all their own food and scarcely have to buy a single thing . . . Nobody is slave and nobody master . . . nobody accumulates but you cannot call them poor because they feed themselves happily and contentedly'.[5] During 1930–31, a Harvard economist, Carle Zimmerman, conducted the first quantitative survey of Siam's agriculture. Everywhere, he found, farmers produced first for their own family needs and sold only any surplus that remained. According to the local saying, the household waited until it saw the yield of the current harvest before selling off the surplus of the previous one. Food security was priority. Beyond the immediate vicinity of the major towns and railheads, the agrarian economy was 'near the state of self-sufficient'.[6]

At the same time, these smallholder householders were linked to the international rice market, but rather remotely. Throughout the delta, there was no significant road. The rivers and canals were the only highways. The international rice demand was conveyed into the villages by petty traders, mostly Chinese, who paddled up the waterways to buy the surplus crop and arrange to transport it downriver by barge. Rice mills appeared on the banks of the Chao Phraya around Bangkok, at the railheads, and at junctions of the waterway system.

By the early 20th century, paddy had become the major export crop and the major source (indirectly[7]) of the government's tax revenue. The government, rice millers, and traders were interested in driving the frontier ahead and increasing the volume of paddy extracted from it. But their efforts were limited. The government set up a new land tax in the 1900s, and for two decades land and poll taxes levied on the peasantry were a significant part of revenues. But peasants gradually learnt how to blunt the

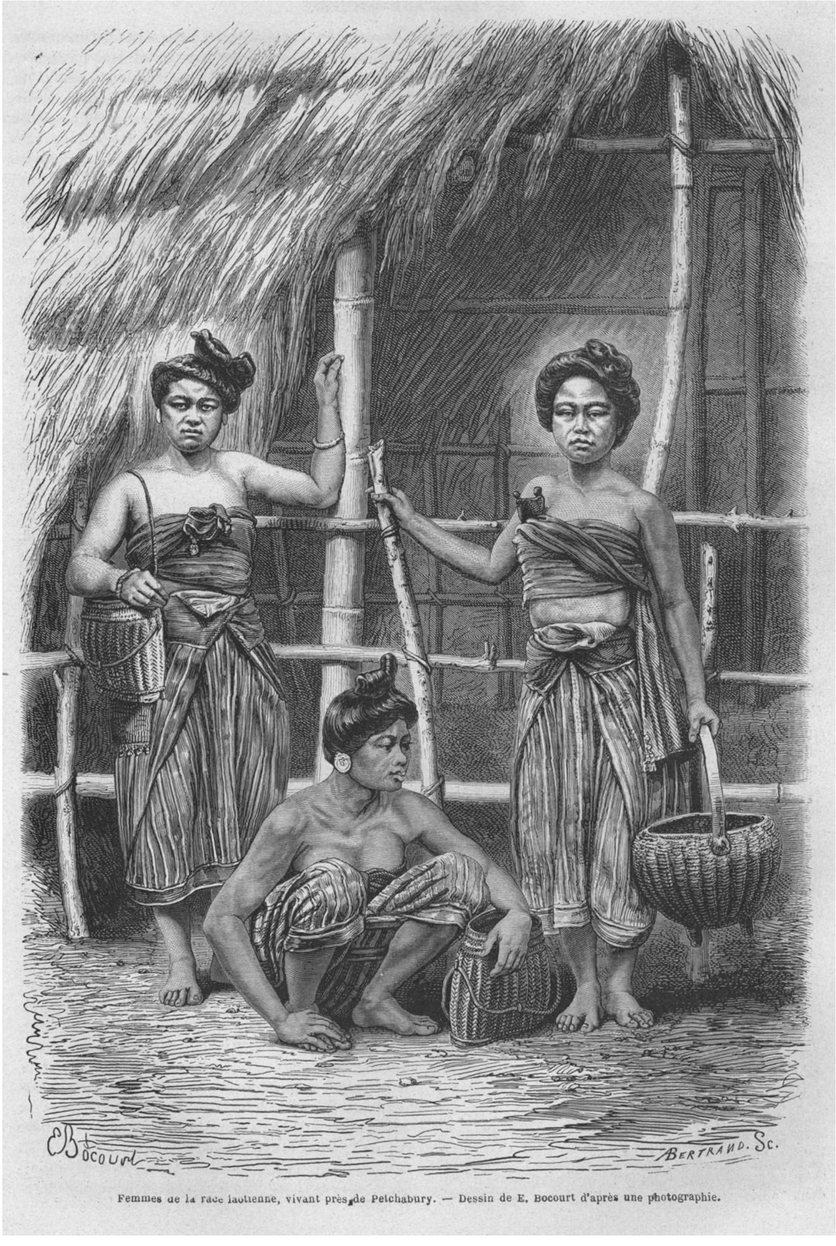

Figure 7: Working women. Descendants of Lao forced migrants in Phetchaburi. Engraving based on a photograph, possibly by John Thomson, who visited this area during 1865–66.

land tax demand by petitioning for remissions on grounds of poor harvest and winning the sympathy of local officials. Siam failed to copy the colonial systems of land revenue administration, which forced peasants to increase both production and revenue. In the 1929 depression, the government was flooded with petitions for remission. It cut the land tax, never fully restored it, and finally abandoned both the land and poll taxes in 1938.

Despite the rhetoric of 'progress', the government did almost nothing to promote agriculture. In the early 20th century, some in the elite pointed out that the citizens of the Siamese nation were overwhelmingly peasants, and that hence the progress of the nation revolved around the development of agriculture. In 1907, Dilok Nabarath, a son of King Chulalongkorn, completed a doctorate in Germany about Siamese agriculture. 'It is odd', he began the work, 'that no monograph exists about agriculture in Siam, which has always been an agrarian state'. He concluded that 'until recent times the farming population has hardly enjoyed any government support', and then of very limited extent.[8] He advocated education for farmers, transport networks, rural credit institutions, and research on agricultural technology. In 1911, Phraya Suriyanuwat, a former minister of finance, wrote *Sapphasat*, the first Thai treatise on economics, which also urged: 'The progress of Siam is ever more dependent on paddy cultivation. Whether Siam will grow quickly or slowly is dependent on the benefits farmers will receive'.[9]

But, in the early 20th century, the government gave agriculture a low priority behind railway building for defence, magnificent royal construction, and projects of nation-building. Dilok was considered 'half-witted' by his fellow princes for his enthusiasm for agricultural improvement; he committed suicide in 1913. King Vajiravudh reacted angrily against *Sapphasat*'s argument that Siam's peasantry was poor and deserved help: 'I am able to attest that no other country has fewer poor or needy people than Siam'.[10] He had both *Sapphasat* and the study of economics banned to prevent such ideas spreading.

The government also gave little help to the rice traders who had an interest in driving increased production. In his 1930–31 survey, Zimmerman was surprised to find that credit was insignificant. Farmers borrowed only for special occasions or disasters, not in the ordinary course of cultivation. Most loans came from neighbours. Only in the more commercialized areas were Chinese shopkeepers and paddy traders giving larger loans. When the depression hit, the government feared bad debts would result in foreclosure, landlessness, and social disorder. But the lack of land titling prevented this. The occupancy titles were not technically transferable. They were traded easily within the local community, but an outsider could get no legal help to enforce title in the face of local opposition. Traders might lend on mortgage, but found it difficult to foreclose for non-payment. In the 1929 depression and other downturns, peasants suffered hardship but did not lose their land. Instead, the traders and millers often went broke.

The traders had to tempt smallholder families into the market with consumer goods – salted pork, dried fish, cloth, and household wares. But the villagers' needs were limited. Until the Second World War, even in the areas most involved in the paddy export market, many households continued to weave cloth, at least for use in special occasions. Much local trade continued on a barter basis at occasional markets. Items such as carts and metal tools were made in the village by part-time specialists. In local folklore, the Chinese trader and shopkeeper became a focus of resentment for profiteering. But there was equally a recognition of mutual dependence. Nowhere did this resentment become violent, even during the market strains of the depression and the Second World War.

Thus, the smallholders of the paddy tracts were drawn into the commercial rice economy only slowly and imperfectly. Gradually, more places became better connected to the market by improvements in transport, and more households made a greater commitment to the market. From the 1930s, transplanting began to replace broadcast in many areas, yields per rai rose, and households had a larger surplus to sell. Exports peaked on the eve of the Second World War at around 1.5 million tons, triple the volume at the start of the century.

Some of the big landlords were unable to manage tenant demands and market swings, and their estates were broken up. Yet in the 1920s in the old canal tracts, there were still 127 landlords owning an average of 3000 rai apiece, including the Sanitwong family, the crown, and some other noble lineages. But outside these limited landlord tracts, this was a smallholder society with families owning plots of 25–40 rai, which they could operate with their own labour, growing rice for family consumption and a surplus for sale.

PORT CITY IN THE COLONIAL ERA

By the First World War, Bangkok and its hinterland of paddy tracts and teak forests were integrated into the economy of an Asia dominated by colonial powers, especially Britain. Three-quarters of Bangkok's exports consisted of rice, and three-quarters of that was carried by British or German ships to the British ports of Hong Kong and Singapore.

What had struck visitors to Bangkok in the mid-19th century was how rural the city seemed. A 'wide expanse of paddy fields' stretched almost up to the palace walls; a 'shady wilderness' was found just behind the bustling Sampheng market; and the whole city seemed like 'a grove interspersed with houses, pagodas, palaces'.[11]

In 1856, only a few months after the signing of the Bowring treaty, the British-owned Borneo Company set up shop in Bangkok. Yet colonial trade developed slowly. Initially, Borneo did little more than export pepper from Chanthaburi. In 1858, an American firm built a steam-powered rice mill, and in 1862 a British firm built a steam-powered sugar mill. Increasing trade caused a shortage of currency, so the government legalized the use of Mexican dollars and began minting silver baht in 1860. A decade later, more firms arrived, mostly branches of companies from colonial India or Java. By 1880 there were 12 rice mills, and the number expanded to reach 84 by 1925. As the junks faded from the scene, British and German steamship firms dominated shipping. In the 1880s, British timber firms moved into Lanna and began to float logs down the Chao Phraya river system. In 1889, the Borneo Company entered the teak business, and over the next 10 years British-owned sawmills clustered at the northern fringe of the capital.

In 1890, H. Warrington Smyth arrived in Bangkok, expecting to find the elegant city described by earlier visitors:

> But where was the Bangkok I had read of – that Venice of the East delighting the soul with its gilded palaces and gorgeous temples? Before us lay but an eastern Rotterdam; mud banks, wharfs and jetties, unlovely rice mills belching smoke, houses gaunt on crooked wooden piles, dykes and ditches on either hand, steam launches by the dozen, crowded rows of native rice boats, lines of tall-masted junk-rigged lighters, and last, most imposing, towering even above the ugly chimneys of the mills, British steamers and Norwegian and Swedish barques and ships.[12]

Once the teak and rice businesses were established in the 1880s, western bankers, managing agencies, retailers, and various service industries arrived to service a growing *farang* community, and to supply a taste for western products pioneered by the court. As Smyth noted:

> In the tennis, cricket, dinners, and club life which centred around it, [Bangkok] was very much like any other settlement of the kind, except for its more cosmopolitan character. At one table would be seated Danes, Germans, Italians, Dutch, Belgians, Americans, and Britishers . . .[13]

This cosmopolitan quality reflected the fact that Siam was increasingly part of the colonial economy but not a colonial subject dominated by a single master. This fact circumscribed the expansion of western business. In the teak industry, the government allowed western firms to dominate, but drew a perimeter around the area of logging concessions and restricted the extent of expansion. Western tin-mining firms overflowed from Malaya into southern Siam, but the government refused to extend the new railway network across to the western coast where the best deposits were, and most colonial tin firms concentrated on Malaya. The rubber industry also extended northwards from Malaya into southern Siam, but the government was reluctant to grant the large land concessions that western planters wanted. Railway promoters besieged the Siamese government with plans to build ambitious regional networks reflecting French and British commercial and imperial dreams, but the government prevaricated and then built its own system designed for its own strategic concerns. Imperial adventurers who wanted to cut a canal across the peninsula on the model of Suez or Panama were courteously humoured.

By 1914, total western investments in Siam were estimated at a figure of US$65 million, less than half the amount in Indochina, one-third in Malaya, and one-tenth in the Netherlands Indies.

Although this colonial economy was modest, it helped to undermine the *jao sua*, the great Chinese commercial families. Their traditional sources of income disappeared in stages over the late 19th century. The junk trade declined steeply after 1855. Most tax-farms were replaced by bureaucratic collection. Rivalry for the remaining tax-farms on opium, liquor, and gambling increased to the point that margins were thin and disastrous losses common. In 1906, the government also started to close down these tax-farms.

The westward gaze of the court undermined the *jao sua* in other ways. The elite bought their status-defining clothes and trinkets from the western importers and emporiums, and no longer relied on the great *jao sua* to bring valuable items from China. The government hired western advisers rather than calling on Chinese with mandarin skills.

Some of the great *jao sua* households reacted by moving into the booming rice trade, timber, shipping, and other ventures. The Chotikapukkana family built a modern rice mill and exported high-quality rice to Europe. Two other great *jao sua* lineages were among the pioneers of rice milling. Others bought land, built shophouses, ran markets, and benefited from rising property values as more immigrants crowded into the areas of Chinese settlement. The Phisolyabut family won a concession to dig the Sathorn canal on the southern edge of the city and to develop plots alongside the colonial-style mansions coming into vogue for Europeans and the local elite.

In the 1890s, some of the great old *jao sua* households jointly resolved to set up banks and shipping companies. In part, they were seeking new opportunities to replace the tax-farms. In part, they were motivated by rising Chinese nationalism and wanted to outdo the Europeans. But they lacked the expertise required for these novel ventures and failed to provide enough capital to survive the ensuing price war with European firms. In addition, a series of poor harvests during 1904–08 meant that for several years very little rice could be exported and rice mills were without profit. The banks that financed them went bust. The ambitious shipping venture fell into debt and was sold in China. Many great households went down, including the Phisanbut family who had established the pioneer Chinese-owned rice mill, and the Phisolyabut family who had had a 40 per cent share of the rice business before this crisis.

Some well-connected families appealed to the king for help. The Privy Purse Bureau had the unique advantage of accumulating its capital from tax returns. It formed the Siam Commercial Bank, which was strong enough to weather this crisis. It made loans to both aristocratic and *jao sua* entrepreneurs. Several of the *jao sua* households survived a little longer on these loans, but then lost the property accumulated over several generations – including rice mills, shophouse developments, and paddy tracts in Rangsit – under foreclosure by the Privy Purse Bureau or its Siam Commercial Bank.

Following this crisis, none of the great Bangkok *jao sua* dynasties of the 19th century survived as leading entrepreneurs in the 20th. These crises rippled down through the lower levels of the commercial pyramid, as a Bangkok poet, Nai But, noted:

> In Sampheng, shops line the road so neatly.
> When profits are good, the heart blooms.
> But the bankrupt ones are closed,
> A notice of forced sale pasted on the door,
> An Indian standing guard.
> Pity the owners whose assets were seized
> Because they had no patron to fall back on.[14]

RICE TRADE AND EARLY MANUFACTURING

While the great *jao sua* households were wrecked, a new business community developed over the late 19th and early 20th centuries, mainly among Chinese migrants who had arrived after 1850.

Driven by poverty and disorder in southern China, the annual immigrant flow rose steadily. By the 1880s there were regular steamship services between Bangkok and the southern Chinese ports, and a regular supply of the poor and desperate ready to make the unpleasant trip. Between 1882 and 1910, 1 million immigrated, of which 370 000 remained permanently. After this surge, almost half of Bangkok's population was Chinese. Around three-fifths were Teochiu, followed by Hakka and Hainanese.

Although western firms dominated the first phase of the rice trade, this domination did not last. Former junk traders and tax-farmers discovered it was not difficult to buy the machinery and hire a Scottish or German engineer to run it. After some of the *jao sua* showed the way, more recent migrants followed. One of the most successful, Akorn Teng, had arrived in 1842, worked first as a coolie, opened a shop, and then made a good marriage, which enabled him to become a middle-ranking tax-farmer in the north. From the 1880s he invested the proceeds in five rice mills, a sawmill, and a dockyard. His son went on to invest in banks, shipping, and rubber in the early 1900s, and was reckoned one of the leaders of the business community. By 1912, there were 50 rice mills owned by Chinese, and by 1925, only one of the 84 rice mills was western-owned.

Akorn Teng and others outcompeted the Europeans because they had direct links to the upcountry networks of Chinese traders who bought paddy from the farmers, because they could better manage the labour force of Chinese coolies, and because they developed trading networks in the markets around the region. Indeed, for some, such as the successful Wanglee family, Bangkok was simply one part of a regional network. By 1870, the Teochiu family had developed a coastal trading network based in Canton and connecting Hong Kong, Singapore, Bangkok, and Saigon. A son of the family, Tan Chi Huang, settled in Bangkok in 1871, married into one of the old *jao sua* households (Posyanon), established a rice mill with modern machinery, and exported rice to the family's network around the region. Over the following years, the business expanded to four rice mills, cloth import, insurance, shipping, and property development.

Several new entrepreneurs prospered quickly on the expanding rice trade, but also collapsed precipitously on the fluctuations in demand and exchange rates during a highly unstable period in the international economy. Akorn Teng's family, which had joined in the doomed banking and shipping ventures of the *jao sua*, was crippled by the 1904–08 crisis, survived in a reduced state, and finally collapsed in a similar crisis on the price swings after the First World War.

But those who did survive these swings emerged stronger. Some survived because they were part of strong regional networks. Others emerged from the lower ranks of rice traders as the *jao sua* firms disintegrated, and responded successfully to the volatility of the international market by building integrated businesses and networks of mutual cooperation.

The Wanglee family, with its extensive regional network, was the most successful. From the First World War onwards, it dealt with the fluctuations in the international market by forming its own bank to handle exchange and remittance, and its own insurance agency. A new wave of rice millers followed the same pattern. Ma Tong Jeng had arrived as a coolie in the late 19th century. He worked as assistant to a German engineer building and maintaining rice-mill machinery, and accumulated the skills and capital to open one of the largest rice mills in 1917. His son, Ma Bulakun, added another large mill in the 1920s, a bank, an insurance company, a shipping business, and a network of companies in Hong Kong and Singapore. The Lamsam family shifted from timber into the rice trade on the same integrated pattern in the 1920s. After the depression, a 'Big Five' of families (Wanglee, Lamsam, Bulakun, Bulasuk, and Iamsuri) controlled over half the rice trade. These families tightened links by exchanging marriage partners, crossing the usual boundaries of dialect groups. They also established a rice-millers' association to control prices.

By the 1920s, both western and Chinese firms had decided that Bangkok was now large enough to support local manufacture of matches, nails, soap, fireworks, patent medicines, tobacco, oil, textiles, paper, bricks, fireworks, shoes, furniture, and services (such as power, water, and transport). A few of the successful early entrepreneurs were among the descendants of the old *jao sua* families who had gained access to education, and who had a first-hand view of the consumption patterns of the new bureaucratic elite. Nai Boonrawd squeezed into one of the first palace schools, then worked for Akorn Teng's rice-mill business and a colonial timber firm before starting his own timber trading business. After a trip to Europe, he tried importing cars, running river ferries, and founding an air service before hitting on the idea of a brewery, finally opened in 1933. One of Boonrawd's distant cousins, Nai Lert, began as a clerk in a western firm, and then imported sewing machines and cars. From there he started a bus service and put the profits into land development. Other new entrepreneurs came from the same milieu of recent immigrants as the big rice merchants. Mangkorn Samsen had been a rice miller before moving into the manufacture of coconut oil and sugar. Koson Huntrakun had been a market owner before establishing one of the first ice factories.

To staff the port, rice mills, factories, and new public utilities, Bangkok acquired a large working population. By the 1910s, the rice mills alone employed 10 000–20 000 people, and altogether the 'coolie' workforce approached 100 000, around a quarter of the city's population. The vast majority was still Chinese, though more Thai were recruited after the decline of labour bondage and the appearance of government enterprises, such as the railways. Working and living conditions were poor. Many took refuge in opium, though they had never taken the drug before coming to Siam. Occasionally, workers protested against their conditions. In 1888, dock workers paralysed the port. Rice-mill workers struck in 1889 and 1892. The government sent troops to disperse the strikers with gunfire and deported the leaders. In 1897, it passed a law to register the *angyi* secret societies believed to be involved in labour organization, and in 1905 formed a special police unit that gained a reputation for heavy-handed policing of Chinese working-class districts. In 1910, the city's Chinese workers went on a mass strike, partly in protest at the rise in taxation after the Chinese were assimilated into the poll tax system.

With the accumulated immigration over the previous half-century, Bangkok's Chinese community in the inter-war period was large and complex. Over time, some chose to merge into Thai society. Earlier, Chinese were legally differentiated: they were excused corvée, were paid a triennial tax, and were expected to wear a pigtail. But corvée ended in 1905 and the triennial tax was abolished in 1909. After the 1911 revolution in China, the pigtail became a symbol of backwardness and most Chinese cut them off. Western-style clothing provided an ethnically neutral alternative to Thai or Chinese traditional styles. The poet Nai But observed Sampheng in the early 20th century:

> The small road is crowded with *Jek*[15] and Thai
> Walking so mixed together they cannot avoid colliding.
> *Jek* mixed up with Thai beyond recognition,
> Who is who, it's confused and uncertain.
> In modern times the place is messed up.
> Chinese cut off their pigtails and become Thai, beyond detection
> Resulting in the abnormality
> That people can chop and change *chat*. Amazing.[16]

But others valued their Chinese identity. With more women joining the migration stream (one-fifth by the 1920s), more married within the Chinese community. Many business families sent their sons back to China for education, partly to imbue them with the culture, but mostly to equip them with Chinese literacy. In Siam and around the region, Chinese was the language of business, especially for documents. When after 1913 they had to adopt a Thai surname, several took a form that deliberately preserved their Chinese clan (*sae*) name.[17]

From the early years of the 20th century, the merchant community began to build an infrastructure of institutions to support urban life and business. The Cantonese formed a speech-group association in 1877, and were followed by the other dialect groups in the early 1900s. In 1908, a Chinese Chamber of Commerce was formed that soon became the official mouthpiece of Chinese business. The first Chinese school was founded in the early years of the century, and the number had expanded to 271 by 1933. The first Chinese newspaper was published in 1905. Hospitals, funerary associations, and other self-help societies appeared from the 1910s. The leading entrepreneurs were the main sponsors and office-holders.

The court's increasing infatuation with the west on the one hand, and the growing wealth, independence, and organization among the Bangkok Chinese on the other, changed old relations of patronage. A member of the ruling elite commented on these changes in 1916:

> In the old days, the Chinese . . . always visited princes and nobles, or high officials, and were very close to the Thais . . . Now they are different . . . they see no need to visit or please anyone. They come in to pursue large businesses, investing in rice mills and trading firms with thousands or millions of baht, without having to have connections with anyone.[18]

THE SOCIETY OF A NATIONAL CAPITAL

From the start of the 20th century, the city and its society were reshaped by its new role as capital of a nation-state. Under the new centralized structure, revenues flowed into the ministries located in the capital, and power flowed outwards. The number of salaried officials grew from 12 000 in 1890 to 80 000 in 1919. In 1916, the Civil Service School was combined with other institutions into Chulalongkorn University, which became the main avenue into the senior bureaucracy. New government offices were built around the fringes of the old city centre. Units of the new standing army were stationed farther out. Areas close to these offices and camps developed into new residential colonies for middle-ranked officials, and for a large ancillary trading and service community.

The senior bureaucracy was the elite of this new government city. At its core were members of the royal and noble families who were cajoled by Chulalongkorn into adopting official careers. In effect, official salaries became the solution to the problem of supporting the rapidly spreading pyramid of the royal clan. In this era, senior official salaries were enough to support a whole household, while old habits of living off the profits of office also lingered. Provincial rulers and great families were also urged to send their sons to the new schools and colleges, as part of cementing their loyalty to the new nation-state.

Several of the great *jao sua* households escaped decline by clambering onto this new ladder of success. Some sent their sons to English-language schools in British Singapore or Penang. Some entered new mission schools. Others used cash and connections to gain their sons' places in the schools established to educate the high born. A descendant of the Luang Aphaiwanit family became the only commoner at one of the palace schools and then studied with American missionaries. His English skill gained him a job at the Borneo Company and then an interpreter's post in the new Police Department. He rose to head the department, and his descendants in the Chatikavanich family followed illustrious careers in the modern bureaucracy and professions.

Recruitment and promotion within the traditional bureaucracy had depended on personal patronage. This pattern remained in the reformed structure. Junior officials attached themselves to great figures in the ministries, and ascended by a mixture of talent, personal services, and politicking. Titles and ranks continued to define and publicize hierarchy. Members of the royal family prefixed their names with distinctive titles showing their distance from the throne. All officials above clerical level received an official title and rank (Chao Phraya, Phraya, and so on) modelled on Ayutthayan practice. An Act in 1913 ordered everyone to have a surname. Members of the royal family were reserved names with the suffix na Krungthep (later changed to na Ayutthaya), which resembled Lord Such *of Somewhere* in European noble titles. Provincial ruling families petitioned for a similar form identifying their place of origin (na Ranong, na Songkhla, na Chiangmai). Other great families, including ennobled Chinese tax-farmers, converted the traditional title of the current or former household head into their surname. King Vajiravudh delighted in inventing elegant Sanskritic surnames for other petitioners from the great households. These titles and special surnames publicized the hierarchical structure of the new bureaucracy as effectively as the royal-bestowed betel boxes that nobles had carried as marks of their rank in the past.

Beyond these great lineages, the city began to develop an embryonic middle class of lesser bureaucrats, teachers, lawyers, managers, and other functionaries of the nation-state and commercial economy. Very few were able to rise upwards from the peasantry. Mostly this new commoner middle class developed from the minor officialdom and market society of the provincial centres.

A few succeeded as compradores, agents who liaised between a European firm and its local customers or partners. The first compradores came from the colonial ports where they had already equipped themselves with the English language. Later, members of Bangkok-settled families got the needed education. Saeng Vejjajiva came from a family operating junks along the eastern gulf. When steamers put the junks out of business, the family placed Saeng in a missionary school, from where he was employed by the leading European firm, East Asiatic.

Others found an upward route through companies formed by the royal family in association with westerners. Thian Hee Sarasin was the son of a traditional Chinese doctor and pharmacist who immigrated early in the 19th century. His talent gained him patronage of a leading aristocrat and American missionaries who sent him to study medicine in New York. On return, he was employed to introduce hygiene and medical care to the army. He rose to a high official rank and also served as a director of several royal-invested companies. His sons pursued careers in commerce and the bureaucracy.

Others found a place in the expanding bureaucracy. Three men who later rose to political prominence illustrate the pattern. Pridi Banomyong came from a mixed Thai–Chinese family in Ayutthaya. The family was well connected in the local nobility, but Pridi's particular branch were market traders, and his father had (rather unsuccessfully) ventured into the rice economy by taking up land on the northern edge of the Rangsit project. Pridi went to *wat* schools in Ayutthaya and Bangkok, and then, through the influence of an uncle, progressed to the prestigious Suan Kulap School and the Justice Ministry's Law School. He was a brilliant student, won a ministry scholarship to study in France, and returned with a doctorate to teach in the Law School and work in the law drafting department. Wichit Wathakan's early career was similar. He was born in Uthai Thani to a family of petty traders who were Chinese by origin but now Thai by practice. He studied at local *wat* schools and then, through the help of a distant relative in the monkhood, at Wat Mahathat school in Bangkok, where his talent gained him an appointment as a teacher. He taught himself English and French, gained a menial clerk's post in the Foreign Ministry, then performed well in the foreign service exams and was appointed to the legation in Paris. Army recruits came from similar origins. Plaek Phibunsongkhram's family had an orchard to the north of Bangkok. He went to *wat* schools and found a family connection to gain admission to the infantry cadet school. From there he progressed to the Military Staff College where he graduated top and won a scholarship to the French Military Academy.

Others stepped onto the same education ladder, but then diverged to other new careers. Kulap Saipradit was the son of a railway clerk. He studied in the *wat* and at the army cadet school, before gaining admission to the prestigious Thepsirin School. He entered the bureaucracy, but found it difficult to rise without the right family connections. He turned to English teaching and translation before making his name as a journalist and creative writer.

These new men came from a mix of backgrounds – urban and rural, Chinese and Thai, mercantile and official. They rose on new educational opportunities provided by foreigners and the government. They tended to identify themselves as part of a new society, defined by their talent and education, rather than by reference to their origins. In their passage through the elite schools, and their work in government offices, they rubbed shoulders with the privileged nobility and were sometimes acutely aware of the role of hierarchy. They were few in number, yet a powerful new element in urban society.

BANGKOK IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

As the capital of the new centralized government and as the funnel for rice and teak exports, Bangkok totally dominated the nation's urban population. Bangkok grew from maybe 100 000 people in 1850 to around 360 000 in the 1910s, 12 times the size of the next largest city.[19] The city also moved from water to land. In the 1850s, most people still lived on or over the water, and almost all traffic was water-borne as the land routes were generally too muddy to be passable. The first road was built in 1857, but in 1890 there was still only 14 kilometres. By 1900, however, a rapidly expanding road network was lined by the palaces and mansions of the bureaucracy, and the shophouses of the mercantile Chinese.

Over the same period, urban dress also changed. In the early 19th century, the Chinese usually wore loose-fitting pyjamas, but most Thai and others wore only a wrap-around lower cloth, with some women adding a second cloth loosely draped over their upper body. Early European envoys were shocked to meet even royalty attired thus, and confessed their frank surprise to find that people attired in such a 'semi-barbarous' fashion were intelligent. The elite responded to the link between clothing and civilization implied in such *farang* attitudes. Mongkut ordered people attending court to wear an upper cloth in order to be more *siwilai*. By the Fifth

Figure 8: Late 19th-century photo of streetside gambling. Girls still keep their hair short. Clothing is still loose wraps, not tailoring.

Reign, both men and women in the court clothed their full body with mainly tailored garments. The new bureaucrats, often working with European advisers, affected a colonial style of cotton shirt and trousers. So did employees of *farang* companies. These elite styles were quickly adapted by other levels of urban society. Male labourers remained bare-chested, but others wore a tied upper cloth, tailored shirt, or jacket in public (Figure 8). By the early 20th century, urban Siam was fully clothed.

The city had changed from a rather traditional 'fort and port' into the capital of a new nation-state, and the centre of a booming rice and teak export trade. The landscape of the city reflected these two sides of its divided character.

The areas to the north and west were the headquarters of the royal-focused nation-state. As the central state's revenues increased from the 1880s, new roads were cut leading north and west from the traditional royal centre on Rattanakosin Island. These roads were lined with the palaces of the expanding royal clan and the mansions of other great households that dominated the new bureaucracy. At Dusit on the outer rim of this north-eastern corner of the city, the royal family developed a modern palace complex, including both traditional teak buildings and European suburban villas. Around this complex spread the offices housing the expanding bureaucracy, camps for the garrisons of the standing army, *wat*, and schools.

The mercantile part of the city clustered on the river to the south. The river frontage itself was lined with monuments to colonial commerce: western embassies; the Oriental Hotel; and the mills, godowns, and offices of western firms, such as East Asiatic, Louis Leonowens, and the Borneo Company. Behind this riverfront to the east was Bangrak, the main European quarter, centred on New Road, built in the 1860s for westerners to reside, stroll, and drive their carriages. Here were the 'foreign legations and the majority of the banks and offices of the Western business people'.[20] Here too were emporiums; dispensaries; the racecourse; Bangrak market, which sold beef, lamb, and European vegetables; and Bangkok United Club, 'the hub around which social foreign Bangkok gyrates'.[21]

Equally prominent along the waterfront were the distinctive mansions of the Chinese merchant princes, often built in a large compound to house different branches of the joint family, and often with a mill or warehouse on one side and a Chinese shrine on the other. Even more prominent were the rice mills, with their distinctive large warehouses and tall chimneys belching black smoke from burning rice husk. The early mills were situated on the city outskirts. But, by the First World War, they had spread through the centre of the city on the western bank, and their chimneys vied with *wat* towers and palace spires in dominating the central city's skyline.

Back from the river on both sides stretched the settlements of the expanding Chinese community, with Hokkien favouring the western Thonburi side and Teochiu more on the east. The early market area of Sampheng had sprawled south and east in a cluster of streets and markets with different specializations, all marked by the characteristic two-storey shophouse in which the family lived above and worked below. These areas were dotted not only with Chinese shrines but also with Buddhist *wat*, as these communities honoured the traditions of their places both of origin and adoption.

Visitors to Bangkok celebrated its cosmopolitan population: 'The crowds which throng the streets are composed of Siamese, Chinese, Malays, Tamils, Bengalis, Madrassis, Pathans . . . Burmese, Ceylonese, Javanese, Cambodians, Annamites, Laos, Shans, and Mohns'.[22] But the first city census of any detail and reliability, conducted in 1883, showed that Siamese and Chinese together contributed 97 per cent of the total, and other populations were tiny. This census counted Chinese as a quarter of the population, rather less than the half that many visitors estimated. Partly this was because the census incorporated the still agricultural outskirts, but partly because many *lukjin* – and many descendants of Malay, Lao, and Khmer war prisoners – by now considered themselves 'Thai'. Occupations were clearly divided. The Chinese dominated commerce (three-fifths of all in this occupation), and commerce dominated the Chinese (three-fifths of all Chinese households). Most of the city population of Siamese was engaged in agriculture or general labour, or earmarked as on corvée duty. The Siamese absolutely dominated official posts, but again this was an ethnic simplification induced by the new idea of nationality; the middle and lower officials of the tax department in the 1900s in fact included 'people of many races and tongues. There were Thais, Chinese, Japanese, Europeans, Indians, Sinhalese, Malays, Malay-Chinese and half castes'.[23]

Gender roles differed sharply by social status. Within all the elite cultures of the city, males were dominant. The traditional bureaucracy, shaped by its warrior role, had been exclusively male, and this principle was carried over into its modern reincarnation. Chinese migration into Siam was almost exclusively male until the 1910s, and the typical entrepreneurial family was a pure patriarchy. Equally, there was not a single woman among the western business leaders photographed for the early commercial gazetteers.

For both the bureaucrat and Chinese commercial families, women were an instrument of dynasty building and diplomacy. They produced the sons needed to sustain the family's next generation, and they bridged connections to patrons and partners. Chinese patriarchs often had several wives – in Siam, in their Chinese place of origin, and perhaps also in other regional ports where they traded.

Within these patriarchal structures, women were far from powerless. Inside the palace, some women had substantive roles, including looking after treasuries. Chulalongkorn's correspondence shows how much he valued the opinions of his favourite queen, Saowapha, whom he designated as regent on his second departure for Europe. The most famous fictional account of an aristocratic dynasty, Kukrit Pramoj's *Si phaendin* (Four Reigns, 1950), makes a woman the axis around which the household and the plot revolve. Under law, money and property gifted to a bride at marriage remained hers alone, and some wives used this capital for their own business. Among the Chinese, female poker and mahjong circles often brokered the marriage alliances, which cemented commercial ties. Moreover, despite polygamy, families sometimes failed to maintain a continuous male line. Cholera took its toll – the hot months were known as the 'cholera season' – and recently arrived Chinese who had perhaps not developed any resistance seemed especially vulnerable. Some Chinese patriarchs *chose* to will at least some property to daughters, partly in honour of local Thai custom, and partly because the sons might move elsewhere within the family's regional network, while daughters were likely to stay put. In one of the greatest *jao sua* households of the 19th century, the family property passed down the female line. Several Chinese matriarchs became property developers and owners of pawnshops.

But among the working population, the female role was much different. They worked. They dominated the street and canal markets to the extent that the government appointed women as market overseers. They planted rice and vegetables on the city outskirts. They laboured in the factories and public utilities. As Smyth noted, 'the energy and capacity so conspicuous in the women of Siam . . . makes them the workers and the business people of the country'.[24]

This combination of elite male dominance and a culture of female labour was the setting for a thriving sex industry. The port and the Sampheng market area, home to many single immigrant males, housed many brothels and tea houses. The government included them among the services subject to tax-farms. In the late 19th century, women were imported from Japan to supplement the local supply. Aristocratic men, who once acquired women through the system of personal slavery, turned to commercial sources. The expansion in higher education, bureaucracy, and professions in Bangkok created another concentration of males and new techniques of trading sex. In the early 20th century, street prostitution flourished. 'No matter where you go in Bangkok', wrote a newspaper correspondent, 'you cannot avoid coming across these women'.[25] In 1908, the government passed an Act to regulate brothels as part of its growing interest in public health, but the illegal trade far outweighed the regulated segment. The new cinemas served a secondary function as pick-up sites. By the 1920s Bangkok had both exclusive clubs and street shows with erotic entertainment. In the early Thai talkie film, *Long thang* (Gone Astray, 1932), a man abandons his wife and wallows in the city's demi-monde until penury forces him back to home and morality. An observer warned that 'Bangkok will become like Paris'.[26]

CONCLUSION

The release of forced labour and the integration of the economy with colonial enterprise accelerated changes in the economy, society, and landscape.

Between the mid-19th century and the early 20th, Siam became a nation of smallholder peasants. The Chao Phraya delta was converted from 'wilderness' into a patchwork of paddyfields. Unfree labour became frontier smallholders. But while the rice frontier supported the majority of the population and drove the national economy, it also drew the peasantry away into the villages, remote from the political life of the nation.

Over the second half of the 19th century, the conversion of the traditional 'fort and port' city into a colonial port and national capital brought into being new social forces. The great families of the service bureaucracy, and the great families of the junk-trading and tax-farming *jao sua*, were converted into the new bureaucratic elite of the royalist nation-state. A new entrepreneurial elite of Chinese origins emerged in the late 19th century and consolidated in the early 20th. Often the families were part of regional networks. They retained links back to their birthplace, especially for education. They increasingly brought their wives from China. Their businesses were not dependent on royal favour, and they were not tied by titles and patronage to the court and Siamese elite. With growing wealth and numbers, they built a new community infrastructure of associations, schools, and welfare groups.

The freeing of labour and the economic transformation of the city created a new working class. As education, bureaucracy, and modern business expanded, a small but important commoner middle class began to form. Its members were often drawn from the mixed Thai–Chinese society of the provincial towns. They were remote from the traditions of the old court and were self-consciously pioneers of a new urban life and culture.

In the early decades of the 20th century, these new urban social forces challenged the absolutist conceptions of the nation and nation-state.