

NOTES

NOTES ON A LETTER FROM PRINCE MONGKUT TO DR. S.R. HOUSE

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Among the records of the American Presbyterian Mission in Thailand which are housed at the Manuscript Division of Payap College there has come to light a holograph letter written by "T.Y. Chaufa Mongkut" to "Mr. House, M.D.,"¹ undated except that it was written on a Monday morning. Mentioned in George Haws Feltus' biography of Dr. House,² an American Presbyterian medical missionary to Thailand, this letter provides insights into the important relationship between Prince Mongkut and the American missionaries in 19th century Thailand. The purpose of these notes is to provide a brief study of the text of this letter and to comment on the letter's historical significance.

Analysis of the Text

Prince Mongkut preferred his English-language correspondents to call him "T.Y. Chaufa Mongkut".³ In a letter to Mr. G.W. Eddy dated July 14, 1848, Prince Mongkut wrote that in Thailand his inferiors or dependants referred to him as "Thun Kramom Fa Yai" (ทูลกระหม่อมฟ้าใหญ่) and that those nominally superior or not dependent to him called him "Chau Fa Yai" (เจ้าฟ้าใหญ่). Prince Mongkut then wrote that "I prefer that my friends, when they write me letters, or send parcels to me, will use this name Chau Fa Mongkut with the letters 'T.Y.' short for Thun Yai prefixed as being that by which I am known in the Laws and Public Documents of Siam." Prince Mongkut of course gave up being called T.Y. Chau Fa Mongkut upon becoming King, when he often signed his letters as "Somdetch Phra Paramendr Maha Mongkut," (สมเด็จพระปรเมนทรมหามงกุฎ) which he sometimes abbreviated to "S.P.P.M. Mongkut."

Prince Mongkut wrote this letter while he was staying at Wat Thong, Bangkok Noi, in Thonburi. This temple, on the north bank of the Bang Phrom Canal in Taling Chan District, would later be renamed Wat Kanchanasinghat (วัดกาญจนสิงหาสน์) in 1854 by Mongkut, after he had become King.⁴ Prince Mongkut stayed at this temple

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while attending the funeral of the mother of Prince Poramanuchit Chinorot (กรมหมื่นปรมาณูชิตชินอรส), referred to in the letter as “Krommanujit.” Prince Poramanuchit Chinorot was a noted author and scholar of Pali, writing and translating numerous religious and historical texts. He held the rank of *Kromamun* (กรมหมื่น), denoting a Prince of the fifth official rank for princes, just below a *Kromakhun* (กรมขุน) and “Krommanujit” was a colloquial shortening of his title and name. King Mongkut was to name Prince Poramanuchit Chinorot the Lord Patriarch (สกลมหาสังฆปริณายก) in 1851 and, even though the letter refers to him as “highest Priest Prince,” he did not yet actually hold the position of Lord Patriarch when Mongkut was Prince and this letter was written. The office of Lord Patriarch was vacant from 1849 until 1851 and that Prince Mongkut called him “highest Priest Prince” most likely indicated unofficial acceptance of Prince Poramanuchit Chinorot as Lord Patriarch.

Although most details regarding this letter can be explained, precise dating has been impossible. The earliest this letter could have been written is 1847, which is when House arrived in Thailand. The latest is 1851, when Prince Mongkut became King. Prince Mongkut almost surely wrote this letter after 1849, when the position of Lord Patriarch became vacant since Mongkut would not have referred to Prince Poramanuchit Chinorot as “highest Priest Prince” if someone else was the Lord Patriarch. Similarly it is quite unlikely that Dr. House, a newcomer to Thailand, would have received this letter on behalf of the other American missionaries at a time when the Rev. Jesse Caswell was still alive. Caswell was on very close terms with Prince Mongkut and did not die until September 1848.

Additional clues to the precise date appear in the note which House wrote at the bottom of the letter, requesting that Mongkut’s words not get into print. This request most likely reflects House’s wish not to embarrass Mongkut at a time of official pressure on the mission and its press in 1850. In a letter of October 8, 1850, the missionary, Samuel Matoon, mentioned “Government persecution of Mission teacher’s”.⁵ Another American missionary, D.B. Bradley, noted in 1850 that King Rama III, alarmed that the missionaries were converting too many Buddhists to Christianity, had arrested all the Thai colporteurs.⁶ Matoon added that employees and teachers of the mission had been “cast into the royal prison” on suspicion of the mission having printed the laws of the country.⁷

The weight of the circumstantial evidence thus strongly suggests a date of 1850 or early 1851. Furthermore, the tone of House’s note, which is that of a person who has more than a newcomer’s knowledge of Thailand, makes such a dating likely since it is improbable that House could have written such a note during his first year or two

in the country. In any case, as House's note indicates, the invitation was apparently not in time and neither House nor his fellow missionaries discussed religion with the assembled monks.

Two other items regarding this letter merit special mention. First, Captain Brown is almost certainly the individual Vella described as "an American merchant" in his biography of King Rama III.⁸ Second, the custom of throwing "limons" (limes) at cremations is still a popular custom in rural central Thailand. After the cremation fire is lighted, individuals standing at the four corners of the funeral pyre place money in the limes and throw them to the crowd as a means for making merit. Placing the coins in fruit is probably a safety measure.

Transcript

wat thong Monday
morning

Dear Sir

I am now at the "Wat thong Bangkok noi" with my Uncle & teacher highest Priest Prince "Krommanujit -" who is rendering funeral offering of his mother two days ago. the highest Priest and his peels [peers?] several princes desire to communicate with English for be strangers in festival as they have heard that the English strangers accustomed to be called on festival of me before. Therefore they petitioned me to write invitation to Captn Brown & Missionaries to be called at Wat thong today evening before 7 o'clock to be attained the time of fire work which will be pleasant. and they wish to give glad reward (money put in limon fruit) to you who arrived their festival by Siamese custom and feed you with any padable food. Will you please to accept their invitation? I think that all or a few or but one of your missionaries must come. I think they will be glad. You also can distribute your book to several high head priests of various Wats because many of them will be assembled here on that time I can introduce you to let them listen you preaching your religious subject too. Please answer to me firstly if you will not excute this invitation. I shall inform to them to assemble for your visitation and hear you teach them or accept your books

your [s] truly
T.Y. Chaufa
Mongkut

P.S.

Please inform to other missionaries
by meant of this letter.

This note though addressed to me, was of course intended for all the Missionaries. The invitation to discourse upon Christianity before the assembled head-priests of various wats—may pass a specimen of oriental compliment—and perhaps of *oriental insincerity*—though—*it may be* His Royal Highness would have been glad—had time allowed—to have got up a kind of discussion—between Missionaries & his Buddhist friends—Pray *do not* let this note *get into print*,—curiosity as it is every way.

Physical Description

The sheet of paper on which the letter is written measures 18½ by 23 centimeters. It was folded with the name Mr. House M.D. appearing on the outside.

Significance of the Document

This letter presents an interesting commentary on Prince Mongkut's commitment to westernization as well as illuminating his relationship with the American missionaries. Mongkut undertook the study of English with Caswell beginning in 1845 and the grammar, spelling, and style of this document indicate that he had made impressive progress. However, this letter is less polished and contains more errors than other letters he wrote at this time, leading one to believe he either wrote this letter hurriedly or had no one to proofread it. Nevertheless, Prince Mongkut had obviously invested no little time in learning the English language. Prince Mongkut's interest in English and willingness to associate with missionaries, at a time when contact with Westerners was not politically popular, indicates he was prepared to move against the tide of political events to further his relationship with Westerners. Prince Mongkut is an early example of what was to become a rather common pattern : the Thai official or member of royalty seeking opportunities to learn Western languages as a means for acquiring European and American learning.⁹

This document also suggests that Prince Mongkut saw that the best way to get the missionaries to cooperate was by offering them an opportunity to preach and to distribute tracts. However, in contrast to Prince Mongkut's understanding of what motivated the missionaries, the note by House shows that he set himself up as superior to the Thai, whom he stereotyped as "oriental". The condescending use of this adjective implies that House framed his interpretation of Mongkut's words and motivations out of a cultural bias against things "oriental". House, one of the missionaries closest to Mongkut, felt the Prince was a forward-looking individual, but when one focuses upon his use of the word "specimen" it almost seems as if House viewed Mongkut, at least in this instance, as a clinical sample of a widespread "oriental" reality.

Finally, this document is significant in yet another way, as one of the few extant documents left from the papers of Dr. House. Besides being addressed to House, Feltus wrote that this letter was among "the papers of Dr. House,"⁹ implying that there existed a body of documents that had once belonged to him. However, Feltus, an upstate New York clergyman, who had apparently neither visited Thailand nor met House, never saw the "papers of Dr. House."¹⁰ Over the last four years, the Payap College Manuscript Division has developed extensive contacts both in Thailand and in the United States in its search for original missionary records. At no point has it discovered any collection of papers written by Dr. House. While it is conceivable that the House papers had already been lost when Feltus wrote his biography in 1924, it is most probable they went missing in World War II when much American Presbyterian Mission belongings and real estate were seized as enemy property and many missionaries were repatriated or interned. The Mongkut to House letter, then becomes one of the few tangible links to the relationship between these two influential individuals.

REFERENCES

1. "T. Y. Chaufa Mongkut to Mr. House, M.D." n.d., in Rare Documents File, Records of the American Presbyterian Mission 1845-1979, RG 001/78 (a), at the Manuscript Division, Payap College.
2. George Haws Feltus, *The Man with the Gentle Heart: Samuel Reynolds House of Siam, Pioneer Medical Missionary 1847-1876* (New York: Revell 1924): 54-55.
3. Prince Mongkut to G.W. Eddy," Seni and Kukrit Pramoj, "King of Siam Speaks." Typescript, in the Siam Society Library : 14-15.
4. Chaokkhun Phranirotharakkit Chonthasaro, "Prawat Wat Kanchanasinghat," in Chaokkhun Phranirotharakkit Chonthasaro, *Ru'ang Manut Winichai lae Prawat Wat Kanchanasinghat* (Bangkok: Wat Kanchanasinghat 1968) : 27.
5. Matoon to Presbyterian Headquarters, October 8, 1850," V. 2, SL 1847-1864 No. 48. Records of the Board of Foreign Missions, Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. Microfilm. The master negative (originals no longer exist) is at the Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, U.S.A.
6. A succinct account is in Walter Vella, *Siam Under Rama III 1824-1851* (Locust Valley, N.Y.; Augustin 1957) : 128-130.
7. *Ibid.* : 127. Vella's source is "Letter from Brown and Co. to Balestier," U.S. Congress, Senate : *Message from the President of the United States Calling for Information in Relation to the Mission of Mr. Balestier, Late United States Consul at Singapore to Eastern Asia*, 32nd Cong., 1st sess., S.Ex. Doc. 38, Washington D.C.
8. On the relationship between Mongkut and House, see Feltus : 55ff, and Donald C. Lord, *Mo Bradley and Thailand*, (Grand Rapids, MI : Eerdmans 1969) : 125.
9. Feltus : 54.
10. *Ibid.* : 5.

Handwritten notes on the left side of the page, including a vertical signature: "W. H. Stone U.S.A."

What thing Monday

Dear Sir
I am now at the
great thing Bangkok
with my Uncle & teacher
highest Priest "Krom"
municipal "Krom" is reading
Funeral offering of his Mother
two days ago. The highest
Priest and his gulf several
priests desire to communi-
cate with English for to
stay in festival as they
have heard that the English
always accustomed to be
called on festival of me
before than for their petition
ed me to write invitation
to Capt. Brown's & Mission
mess to be called at what
thing today evening to
festival to be attained the
time of the week which

will be pleasant. and they
 wish to give glad reward
 (money put in lemon fruit)
 to you who arrived this
 festival by Simons custom
 do you? with any pedable
 fear. Will you please to
 accept this invitation? I think that
 all or a few or but one of
 your missionaries must
 come. I think they will
 be glad. you also can
 distribute your book
 to several high head
 priests of various tribes
 because many of them
 will be assembled here
 on that time. I can introduce
 you to let them listen
 you preaching your
 religious subject too.
 Please answer to me firstly
 if you will not write

this invitation. I shall
 inform to them to assemble
 for your invitation and
 have you read them
 or accept your book?

you truly
 J. Y. Craufu
 Money put

P.S.
 Please inform
 to other missionaries
 by means of this
 letter

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