

BANGKOK IN 1883: AN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL PROFILE

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In 1883 Bangkok was a city in transition, just beginning its growth into the large, crowded, modern metropolis it is today. At this point Bangkok had been the capital city for a century; in 1782 King Rama I of the Chakri dynasty had moved the capital, established by Taksin, from the west bank of the Chao Phraya to the east bank probably for security reasons, as the big bend in the river protected his new city on three sides while canals protected the fourth.

The capital grew slowly during its first hundred years. As early Western visitors noted, transportation was primarily by water. The Chao Phraya River and the major canals provided both the visual and physical orientation for the city. In 1821 John Crawfurd wrote:

The morning presented to us a very novel spectacle—the capital of Siam, situated on both sides of the Menam. Numerous temples of Buddha, with tall spires attached to them, frequently glittering with gilding, were conspicuous among the mean huts and hovels of the natives, throughout which were interspersed a profusion of palms, ordinary fruit trees, and the sacred fig. On each side of the river there was a row of floating habitations, resting on rafts of bamboo, moored to the shore. These appeared the neatest and best description of dwellings; they were occupied by good Chinese shops. Close to these aquatic habitations were anchored the largest description of native vessels, among which were many junks of great size, just arrived from China. The face of the river presented a busy scene, from the number of boats and canoes of every size and description which were passing to and fro. The number of these struck us as very great at the time, for we were not aware that there are few or no roads at Bangkok, and that the river and canals form the common highways, not only for goods, but for passengers of every description. . .

The right bank of the Menam, where our residence was, had only a narrow strip of dwellings along

the river-side. Behind these, the country, which is inconvenient foot-paths, and frequent canals, over which there are no other bridges than single narrow planks or trunks of trees.¹

There was little change when Sir John Bowring visited Bangkok 34 years later:

The limits of the city are marked by a semicircle of the Meinam on the western side, and by a canal on the eastern, whose two extremities joining the river make the city almost circular. There is an inner island, formed by another canal, also joining the Meinam. There are two other canals, viz., one from north to south, and another from east to west, crossing the city at right lines, besides auxiliary canals on both sides of the river. The highways of Bangkok are not streets and roads, but the river and the canals. Boats are the universal means of conveyance and communication. Except about the palaces of the Kings, horses or carriages are rarely seen . . .

There are a few houses in Bangkok built of stone and brick; but those of the middle classes are of wood, while the habitations of the poor are constructed of light bamboos, and roofed with leaves of the atap palm.²

The Treaty of Friendship and Commerce between Great Britain and Siam, which Bowring negotiated, still marks the beginning of Thailand's transition from a traditional Southeast Asian kingdom to a modern state. As treaties were signed with all major Western powers, foreigners began to settle in the city: consuls, merchants, and missionaries. The new foreign community had some very different ideas about urban planning. The city began to change.

. . . the foreign consuls all signed their names to a petition which they presented to the King. It said that the Europeans were used to going out in the open air, riding carriages or riding horseback for



Various river craft and floating structures on the Chao Phraya at Bangkok circa 1885.

Source: Child, J.T., The Pearl of Asia, Reminiscences of the Court of a Supreme Monarch, or Five Years in Siam. Chicago.

pleasure. These activities had been good for their health and they had not suffered from illnesses. Since their coming to live in Bangkok, they had found that there were no roads to go riding in carriages or on horseback for pleasure, and they had all been sick very often.

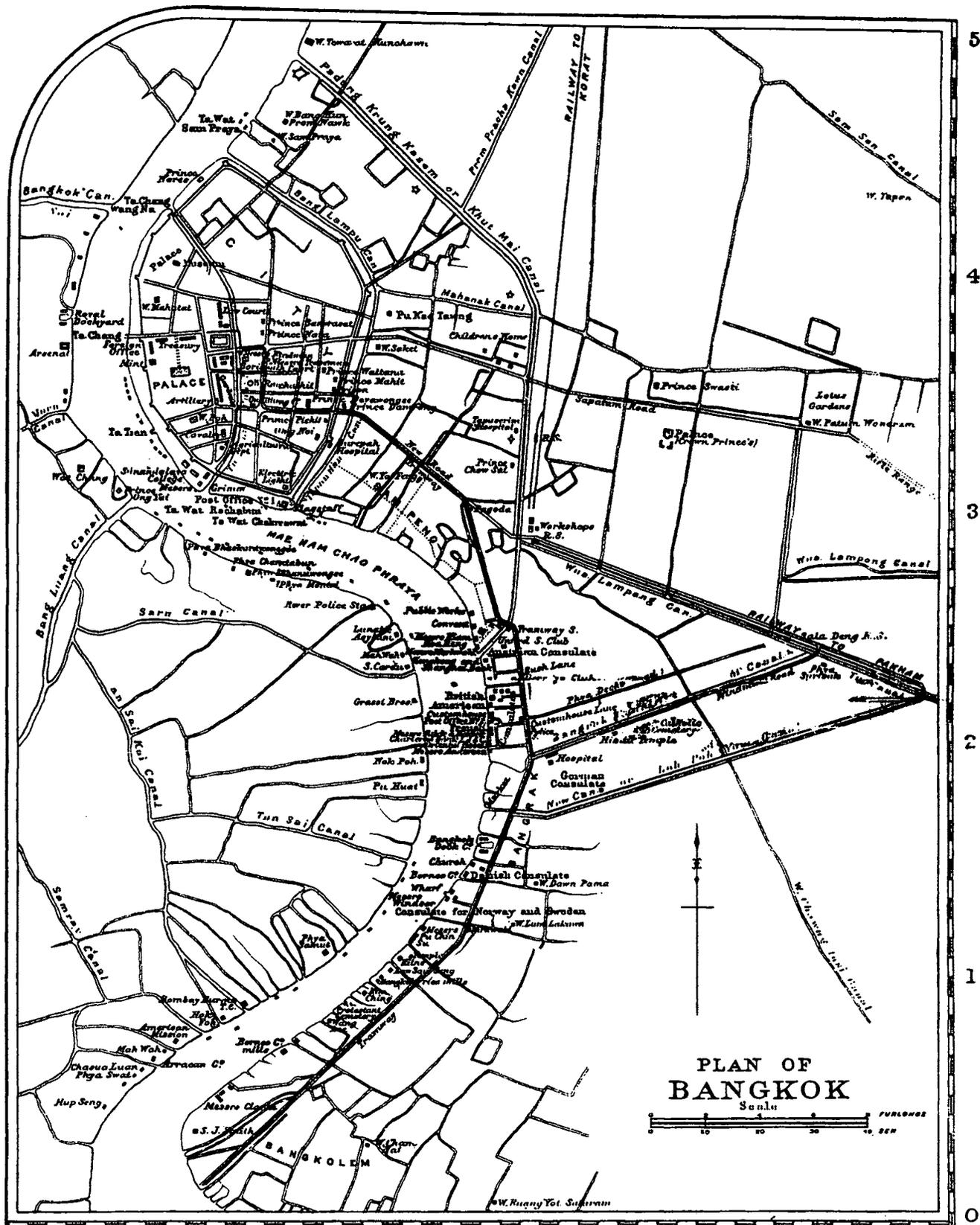
The King, after having heard the contents of this petition, reflected that recently the Europeans had been coming to live in Bangkok in increasing numbers every year. Their countries had roads that made every village or town look orderly, pleasant and clean. Our country was greatly overgrown with grass or climbers; our pathways were but small or blind alleys; our larger pathways were dirty, muddy, or soiled, and unpleasant to look at. . . .³

The introduction of roads was to change, completely, the character of Bangkok. People began to move from the river and the canals onto land. The road network was to establish future patterns of growth, away from the inner city and the river bank, out into the gardens, orchards and rice fields.⁴

This profile of Bangkok is based primarily on the information about the residents of the city who lived along its roads and lanes and in its villages. This material was recorded in the first Bangkok Postal Directory, published by the Post and Telegraph Department in 1883.

Before 1883, the British Consulate handled the capital's international mail while the court, itself, was responsible for its internal correspondence. The British Consulate had been granted Royal Permission in 1867 to accept international mail for transshipment to Singapore. The Consulate sold postage stamps and constructed a small building where mail could be received and picked up. This arrangement lasted until 1882.⁵

The British, however, had offered to extend their service beyond 1882. The British Consulate proposed the establishment of a postal agency in Bangkok which would have been a branch of the Post Office of the Straits Settlements in Singapore. The government of the Straits Settlements was willing to set up an agency provided it was given a monopoly over the sale of postage stamps and over international mail. All of the employees would have been under the direction of the Postmaster General of the Straits Settlements while the local supervisor would have been the British Consul in Bangkok.⁶



Plan of Bangkok on a scale of 1 inch to 880 yards from "Map of the Kingdom of Siam and its Dependencies" printed in England in 1888, and believed to have been adapted from the larger-scaled map in the Thai version.

A memo by the Acting Postmaster General of the Straits Settlements, H. Trotter, dated 1st September 1882, reported that one of the brothers of the king had written to him about the establishment of a postal service in Bangkok. The Thai prince, apparently, had been talking about this with a Mr. Bettije, Superintendent of the Telegraphs in Bangkok. Mr. Trotter noted that Mr. Bettije had been a former employee of the post office in Singapore where he had attained "a fair knowledge of our system." Mr. Bettije had looked into the prospects for a Bangkok post office, but had found the costs of setting it up too high. Thus, Mr. Trotter remarked, it had been postponed. Current postal services in Bangkok were provided by Mr. Gardner, Constable of the British Consulate. European residents in Bangkok paid a small, voluntary subscription fee for postal services. All profits were returned to Singapore. Mr. Gardner received a 10% rebate on the sale of Straits Settlements stamps plus 10% of the postage due on unpaid letters. Mr. Trotter estimated the cost of running a postal service in Bangkok at \$45 a month or 100 pounds a year plus the salaries of the postmen.⁷

If the government of the Straits Settlements had opened a branch post office in Bangkok, it would have created additional problems for the Thai as relations with the British Consul, at this point, were highly sensitive. The Thai wisely moved ahead with their own plans and the British Consulate informed London, "the Siamese Government have lately established a local Post Office for Bangkok and are full of projects for further undertakings of the kind. They have therefore rejected the proposal of the Straits Government to establish a branch here."⁸

The Thai, nevertheless, did borrow many ideas from the postal system of the Straits Settlements. When I presented an early version of this paper at SOAS, the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, a member of the audience informed me that the format of the Bangkok Postal Directory was similar to those used by the Straits Settlements at that time.

The Bangkok Postal Directory, referred to below by its Thai title, *Sarabanchi*, was published as a result of a royal order by King Chulalongkorn. In his introduction the king discusses the changes which are taking place in Siam, noting the presence of large numbers of foreigners and the recent establishment of the Post and Telegraph Department headed by Krommaluang Phanuphanwongworadet. King Chulalongkorn writes that this new department, if it is to perform its duties, needs a register of the population. This is the first register of its type in Siam.

The register is in four volumes, with varying titles. The first volume, *Sarabanchi Suan thi 1 khu Tamnaeng Ratchakan Samrap Cao Phanakngan Krom Praisani Krungthep Mahanakhon Tangtae Camnuan Pi Mamae Benchasok Chulasakarat 1245 (Classified Directory of the Royal Family and Government Officials, Post and Telegraph Department, Bangkok, 1883)*, lists all government departments, their personnel, and their addresses. This first volume is available in the SOAS library at the University of

London and on microfilm from the Center for Research Libraries in Chicago.

The remaining three volumes bear the title *Sarabanchi Suan thi 2-3-4 khu Ratsadon nai Changwat, . . . Samrap Cao Phanakngan Krom Praisani. . . (Register, parts 2-3-4 of the Population of the Changwat by the Post and Telegraph Department for the Year 1883)*. The second volume is subtitled *Thanon lae Trok (Streets and Lanes)*, the third lists *Ban Mu lae Lamnuan (Villages and Waterways)*, while the fourth covers *Khu lae Khlong Lam Patong (Ditches and Irrigation Canals)*. The copy of volumes 2-4 which I have been working with is a microfilm given to me by Acan Maenmas Chavalit, former director of the National Library of Thailand. The microfilm was given to me with the request that I put the contents on the computer as an illustration of computer technology for Thai students.

This paper is based on the contents of volumes two and three which cover streets, lanes, villages and waterways. These two volumes list some 77 streets, 102 lanes, 313 villages, and 36 waterways. The visual image that is presented of Bangkok matches that of John MacGregor writing in the 1890s,

On land there is only one street worthy of the name, and this long street leads from near the Palace enclosure, for a least three or four miles, to the southern outskirts of the city, . . . The rest of the streets, especially outside the walled city, consists for the most part of comparatively short offshoots passing here and there; for the city . . . has no great inland depth in it. . .⁹

The most important of the early roads were Charoen Krung (New Road), begun in 1862, and Bamrungmuang Road, begun in 1863. From their origins the two roads were commercial centers, attracting speculators who constructed shophouses and market places. The construction of the roads also gave employment to Chinese labor.¹⁰ Charoen Krung was by far the longest of the early roads. It stretched south, following the river, reaching down into the rice paddies, dominating all maps of the city drawn at that time. Bamrungmuang, on the other hand, cut directly through the inner city and out into the fields on an east-west axis. Both roads were to determine the future configuration of Bangkok, with Charoen Krung serving as the western boundary along the river and Bamrungmuang heading east into the interior, becoming, in the twentieth century, Rama I Road, and, then, extending into Sukhumvit Road, the main eastern artery of the present city, with its numerous side streets. Apart from these two important streets, the arrangement of the *Sarabanchi* makes it difficult to determine the location and extent of local neighborhoods. The major identifying features for most place names were waterways, many of which have been filled in or covered over, Buddhist wats, about half of which have either disappeared or had a change of name, and the houses of Thai nobility, who, of course, have all passed away. Hence we find such place names as the 'street in front of Wat Bowonniwet', the 'lane behind Wat Bowonniwet', the 'village of Wat Bowonniwet', and the 'lamnam of Bang Lamphu', all scattered among the wide-spread pages of the *Sarabanchi*,

completely breaking up the pattern of neighborhoods which existed in 1883.

The *Sarabanchi* gives building numbers for each unit along with brief expository comments, such as: house, shop, sala, wat, fort, etc. If the building is a house or a shop, the register will give the title and the name of the person in charge of the building. The title and name of only one person is given at each address. I assume that this person is the head of the household or the owner or manager of the shop. Then, the register may provide additional information: the parent—mother or father—of the occupant; payment of the Chinese head tax; note if the building is rented; tell if the building is built of bamboo, wood, or brick; give the title and name of the owner of the building; the occupation of the person in charge; any special name or title resulting from the occupant's duties; and, finally, the master of the person in charge.

The type of material is of obvious interest for a number of reasons. However, this particular set of material is also very difficult to work with. The *Sarabanchi* is a hybrid document, based on a Western model, but containing many indigenous features. There is considerable inconsistency in the ways in which the information is recorded. The spelling of the Thai language is not yet standardized. Nor are the descriptions of the buildings, the details of their construction, or the occupations of the residents standardized. At this point in time, no person possessed a surname. Most heads of households are registered by their personal names, usually just one or two syllables, with the result that computer printouts contain long lists of people with such names as Bun, Chun, Daeng, Ha, Meng, Nim, Phloi, and so on, which imposes severe restrictions on some types of analysis.

Nevertheless, I have gone ahead with the coding of volumes two and three. This has yielded 17,857 computer cards, 16,739 of them containing information about heads of households. This material has been run through a series of computer procedures. In spite of the problems involved, the results, allowing for the limitations of the material, have been very interesting. In some cases this material offers additional evidence for generally accepted views of Bangkok in the 1880s. In a few cases, it should serve to modify standard interpretations of Thai development.

Only a small handful of government buildings are listed in the *Sarabanchi*. I should note that we do not know what government buildings, apart from the palaces of the royal family, existed at that time. Nevertheless, there were public facilities in Bangkok. These are given in Table 1.

Table 1: Public Facilities

Bridges	9
Clinics (rong mo)	2
Courts	2
Forts: Ordinary	2
Palace	7
Gates: Ordinary	15
Palace	9
Guard Houses	4
Hospitals	1
Hotels	2
Jails	2
Markets	8
Palaces	26
Police Stations	8
Religious Buildings	
Chinese Temples	20
Churches	1
Hindu Temples	1
Mosques	12
Spirit Shrines	3
Wat/Bot	61
Rice Bins	8
Rice Mills	3
Schools	3
Theaters (Lakon)	1

Although the number of more sturdy brick or masonry buildings (tük), Table 2, were increasing, the number of wooden and bamboo houses and shops remained high. Numerous rafts still lined the river bank. The large number of shops indicated the commercial character of much of the city.

Table 2: Other Buildings

Brick buildings (tük)	2,064
Houses (rüan)	8,046
Rafts	800
Sala	18
Shops (rong)	4,578

The titles of the heads of households and the owners/managers of shops can also serve as a means of ethnic identification. The ethnic identity of the heads of households is given in Table 3.

Table 3: Ethnic Groups

Ethnic Group	Number	Percent
Thai	9,442	56
Chinese	6,274	38
Indian	6	4
Khaek	514	
Malay	212	
Burmese	14	1
Khmer	3	
Lao	13	
Mon	2	
Vietnamese	74	
Farang	131	1
Unknown	54	-
Total	16,739	100

(The nationality of Farang is not always given. Of those whose nationality is given, we have: American-7; Danish-1; Dutch-6; English-37; French-7; German-15; Portuguese-7; and Swedish-1.)

56 percent were Thai, and 38 percent were Chinese. The Indians, Khaek, and Malays make up the third largest group of people with only 4 percent of the registers' population. (The term Khaek, as used in the *Sarabanchi*, often suggests Javanese as well as Malay or South Asian background. I use the word here only because it is used in the text and cannot be translated in more specific ethnic terms.) However, the aggregate figures include a large number of outlying wats and their villages. The inner city population of Chinese was higher. If we consider only the citations for streets and lanes, dropping villages and waterways, we are left with 7,531 people, of which 47 percent (3,571) were Thai, 47 percent (3,559) were Chinese, 4 percent (335) Indian, Khaek or Malay, and 2 percent other Southeast Asians and Farang.

Chinese were well distributed throughout the city where they could be found in nearly every neighborhood as shown in Table 4. There was little clustering of any ethnic group in any location with but a handful of exceptions, one of them being the Chinese neighborhood of Sampheng.

The Chinese, since they were not subject to corvee, were required to pay a separate head tax. As can be seen in Table 5, many Chinese did pay this tax. Thai and all other ethnic groups were exempt from this tax.

Table 4: Ethnic Distribution in the Largest Neighborhoods

	Thai	Chinese	Indian	Farang	Other	Total
Streets						
Charoen Krung Nai	98	86	6	3	1	194
Charoen Krung Nok	224	780	79	35	15	1,133
Bamrungmuang	114	210	23	1	6	354
Ban Khamin	152	49	4	-	-	205
Fuang Nakhon	163	145	7	5	-	320
Rop Phranakhon						
Chan Nai	376	121	-	-	3	500
Rop Phranakhon						
Chan Nok	202	53	2	-	-	257
Sampheng	12	483	24	1	-	520
Waterways						
Bangkok-East	539	195	8	3	4	749
Bangkok-West	70	160	9	4	1	244
Bang Lamphu-West	84	121	8	4	1	218

Table 5: Number of Chinese Paying the Head Tax

Paid	4,736	75	percent
Exempt	1,530	25	percent
Total	6,274	100	percent

Chinese could obtain exemption from the head tax by seeking a master; several sought protection from Thai officials. Others looked to the foreign consuls for assistance. Those Chinese who were registered under a patron, Thai or foreign, were usually exempt from the Chinese head tax.

Exemption from the Chinese head tax provided an incentive for individual Chinese to seek dependent status. Actually, 44 percent of the people in the register held dependent status of one type or another (Table 6). Most were registered with a *nai* or master

Table 6: Heads of Households Holding Dependent Status

Status	Number
With a Master	6,956
- of whom:	
Farang	2
France	193
Germany	1
Great Britain	391
Italy	3
Netherlands	238
Portugal	123
United States	11
Subtotal	962
Converts	2
Employed By Someone	102
Lek Wat (Owes service to a wat)	4
Live With	98
Phi Liang (Nursemaids)	8
Prisoners of War	10
Servants	86
Slaves, Bondspersons	130
Total	7,396

(Most of the people registered under the foreign embassies are Chinese or Indian or Malay or Khaek. Some of the people listed as 'employed by' are employed by foreigners.)

Most listed as of dependent status were registered with a *nai* or master for whom they provided various services. The Thai registrar handled the Chinese, as well as the other Asians who sought foreign protection, in the same way they handled the Thai who had masters. No Thai was under the protection of a foreign consul apart from foreigner's employees, who were then listed under their employer, as was Nai Ram, an employee of Dr. Bradley. Most slaves and bondspeople were Thai; a few were Chinese. They were registered as heads of households, apparently owned the buildings they occupied, and in some cases engaged in normal occupations.

The inhabitants of Bangkok were employed in several ways (Table 7). The largest source of employment, 42 percent, was in marketing, followed by 16 percent in government service, and 15 percent in manufacturing (small workshops for such crafts as weaving, tailoring, metalwork, woodworking and pottery). In 1883, Bangkok, even though it was a center of government, had already moved away from government service as a major means of employment. This evidence is one of the unexpected surprises of this research.

Table 7: Types of Employment in Bangkok in 1883

Royal Palace (accountants, guards, wardrobe, retired, Kalahon)	197	
Front Palace (caretakers, artisans, Klang Sinkha)	141	
Other (Wat Phrasirattana, Wang Khwa)	3	
Krom	<u>631</u>	
Subtotal		972 11%
Officials (clerks, scribes, record keepers)	412	
Tax Collectors	<u>28</u>	
Subtotal		440 5%
Professionals (doctors, herbal doctors, massage, theater, musicians, teachers, accountants)		320 4%
Manufacturing (weaving, clothing, metal-work – gold, silver- precious stones, kitchenware, nipa, lime, opium)	1,344	15%
Employees (sewing, clothing, house agents)	377	4%
Agriculture and Animal Husbandry (growing rice, flowers, betel, market gardening, raising pigs, fowl)	1,005	12%
Marketing (selling groceries, rice, fish, fruit, noodles, khanom, vegetables, timber, ramie, tobacco, liquor, oil, medicine, opium, cloth, Buddha images, miscellaneous)	3,737	42%
Commerce, Business (Gambling dens, pawn shops, brothels)	426	5%
Miscellaneous (Christians, Christian religious teachers, servants of foreigners, other)	192	2%
Total		8,813 100%

A breakdown of employment opportunities by ethnic group (Table 8) should help to modify some of our ideas about the ethnic division of labor in Thailand in the 1880s. As expected the Thai clearly hold most of the government positions. Only a small number of Chinese and Vietnamese hold positions in the royal palaces or serve as government officials. However, the Thai dominated professional activities, and, surprisingly, manufacturing. Bangkok housed a large number of Thai artisans, who, at this time, were holding their own in relationship to the Chinese and the other groups, with a 51-49 split; 692 Thai, and 642 other ethnic groups. Although the Chinese position in marketing and commerce is very strong, there is, nevertheless, a Thai presence in these fields. The Thai had not

isolated themselves behind the walls of government service and agriculture, they had not cut themselves off from such areas of activity as manufacturing, marketing, or commerce. This suggests that the history of Chinese economic dominance needs to be reexamined. It may not have been as complete for all periods of the nineteenth century as many authors have alleged.

Table 8: Employment by Ethnic Group

Employment	Thai	Chinese	Indian Malay Khaek	Other SEA	Farang
Royal Palace	191	1	2	1	–
Front Palace	136	1	1	1	2
Other	4				
Krom	598	10		20	3
Officials	366	47	13	2	2
Subtotal	1,295	59	16	24	7
Professionals	193	97	12	2	13
Manufacturing	692	585	55	–	2
Employees	89	252	26	12	3
Agriculture &					
Animal Husb	591	345	5	7	1
Marketing	852	2,675	174	16	15
Commerce	64	341	13	1	4
Miscellaneous	96	74	2	1	13
Total	3,872	4,428	303	63	58

(Nineteen of the Southeast Asians employed in Krom were Vietnamese.)

There is yet one more aspect of the economy in which the Thai held a strong position. The Thai owned much of the property in Bangkok. In 1883, as is shown in Table 9, most of the Chinese did not own the buildings they occupied. Many apparently refused to indicate their relationship to the buildings they lived in, but even when we allow for this large unknown factor, we find that some 67 percent of the Chinese were registered as renters, 'live theres,' and caretakers, a higher percentage than any other ethnic group except the Farang.

Table 9: Owners and Renters by Ethnic Group

	Thai	Chinese	Indian Malay Khaek	Other	Farang	Total
Own	7,925	1,947	485	111	52	10,520
Rent	637	3,722	158	17	49	4,583
Live There						
(asai)	454	265	31	3	11	764
Rent Land	35	195	46	2	1	279
Caretakers	16	5	0	0	0	21
Subtotal	9,067	6,134	720	133	113	16,167
Unknown	375	140	12	27	18	572
Total	9,442	6,274	732	160	131	16,739

An examination of the titles of the owners of rental buildings indicates that the Chinese were already investing heavily in rental property. Of the 4,583 rented buildings, 1,091 (24 percent) were owned by Chinese. In other words, although most of the Chinese were not yet owners of real estate, some Chinese were making heavy investments in property.

Many visitors to Bangkok, past and present, have commented on the social problems present in the city. We can obtain some idea of the extent of these problems by examining the number of places of business which had a social impact as shown in Table 10.

Table 10: Social Problems

	Inner Bangkok	Outer Bangkok	Total	Headed by Chinese
Alcohol-Shops	440	57	497	459
Alcohol & Misc.	28	2	30	25
Alcohol & Gambling	14	–	14	14
Alcohol & Opium	6	11	7	6
Total	488	60	548	504 (92%)
Brothels	26	1	27	9 (33%)
Gambling Houses	69	44	113	103
Lottery Shops	11	5	16	15
Total	80	49	129	118 (91%)
Pawn Shops	154	6	160	159
Pawn & Lottery	2	5	7	7
Total	156	11	167	166 (99%)
Opium Dens	245	18	263	258
Opium Companies	2	1	3	3
Opium Storage	9	–	9	9
Total	256	19	275	270 (98%)

It is all too clear that there was a connection between the social problems that existed in Bangkok in the 1880s and the large Chinese immigrant community. As Table 10 shows, a total of 1,067 Chinese managed over 90 percent of all liquor shops, gambling houses, pawn shops, and opium dens. The only vice they did not control was prostitution. Surprisingly only 150, or 14 percent, of these Chinese were under foreign protection. The diplomatic records in Great Britain and the United States for the last half of the nineteenth century contain numerous references to conflicts that arose between Chinese dealers in alcohol and opium and the Thai state. These records give the impression that the number of Chinese businessmen seeking foreign protection was much higher. The information in the *Sarabanchi* indicates that most Chinese shopkeepers were independent, not under the authority of any individual, government office, or foreign flag.

It is possible to say that as of 1883, the Chinese had not yet achieved a dominant position throughout the Bangkok economy. They were just beginning to invest in property; they did

not yet hold a dominant position in manufacturing or in professional life. And, in their strongest areas, marketing and commerce, they were still faced with competition from the Thai and from other ethnic groups. The only area of the local economy that the Chinese dominated was the sale of alcoholic beverages and opium. The Chinese also managed most of the gambling houses and pawn shops. Nevertheless, in 1883, Bangkok was an ethnically mixed city still very much under the control of the Thai in most of its social and economic activities.

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Royal Thai Survey Department's *Maps of Bangkok A.D. 1888-1931* (See p. 51). Sternstein's *Portrait of Bangkok* contains a series of small scale reproductions of maps of Bangkok drawn between 1797 and 1971 plus numerous drawings and photographs of the city during the two centuries of its existence. Other old photographs are reproduced in the two volumes by Thepchu Thapthong. The books by Davis, the Post and Telegraph Department (Krom Praisani Thoralek), and Samnak Nayok Rattamontri (the Prime Minister's Office), are histories of the postal and telegraph system. They are especially concerned with Thailand's entry into the Universal Postal and Telegraph Unions. Most of the remaining items listed are either the accounts of foreign visitors or general histories of the city and its growth.

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