

Siam's Old Singapore Ties

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Introduction

This article is an abridged and edited version of a longer article that was prepared for a commemorative publication for the inauguration of the new premises of the Thai Embassy in Singapore.¹ It is by no means meant as an academic article—indeed, although I use the word “old”, I am referring to the ties, not Singapore itself, which has had certain “connections” with Siam under King Ramkhamhaeng and down the ages—but has been prepared as a “reminder” of Singapore’s continuous and close association with the kings and people of Siam for well over a century. It was thus envisioned as a non-scholarly and basically descriptive article. That said, I hope to remind readers that the advent of “old” Singapore, dating from 1819, proved to be a momentous event for Siam, for it had the effect of changing the traditional pattern of Siam’s trade, henceforth to be characterized by the fast-growing junk trade between Chinese merchants in Siam and their counterparts in Singapore.

I. First contact

The first Siamese-Singapore direct contact occurred in April 1821, barely two years after the founding of Singapore by Sir Stamford Raffles. A mission led by John Morgan, an English merchant resident in Singapore, was entrusted with a letter addressed to the King of Siam, in which Colonel William Farquhar, Resident of Singapore, informed the King of the “new Establishment the British Government has formed here” and expressed the hope for future commercial ties.²

The emissary was generally well received in Bangkok. Siam was then ruled by King Rama II (r. 1809-1824), who granted Morgan an audience, after he had met with Siamese officials, in particular Krom Muen (Prince) Chesda, the King’s eldest son, who was in overall charge of foreign relations and would soon succeed his father on the throne as King Rama III (r. 1824-1851). Thus, the first direct contact passed off reasonably smoothly and laid the groundwork for future bilateral relations; while

¹ *From Hurricane House to Royal Thai Embassy Singapore* (Singapore: The Royal Thai Embassy, Singapore, 2014).

² O. Frankfurter, “The Unofficial Mission of John Morgan, merchant, to Siam in 1821”, *JSS*, 11 (1914-1915), Appendix, p. 8.

focused on trade, the relationship would over the next hundred years develop beyond commerce despite being susceptible to varying geopolitical forces and against the background of the far-reaching transformation enveloping both Singapore and Siam.

II. Trade

At the time of John Morgan's mission, trade already existed between Siam and Singapore. Colonel Farquhar himself had pointed out to Raffles that out of twenty or so junks moored in Singapore harbour, three were from China, two from Cochin-China (Vietnam), and the rest from Siam.³ The number of Siamese junks steadily increased, so that by 1826 Singapore had become the hub of the Siamese junk trade in the entire Southeast Asian archipelago. This phenomenon signified that Siam would no longer rely only on the centuries-old China trade.⁴

Siam's foreign commerce and revenue had traditionally been centred on trade with China under a system characterized by the tributary relationship and by the active participation in the trade by Siamese kings, coupled with monopolistic practices—a situation also to be found elsewhere in contemporary Asia. Equally, dating from ancient times, Siam's other trading partners came from the lands to the west, or Indian Ocean side, of the country, known as "*Khaek*", predominantly Muslims, who were joined later by Europeans, such as the Portuguese, Dutch and English. Administratively, trade with China and all other eastern lands was put under the jurisdiction of the Eastern Department, while trade with others in the West, including Europeans, was supervised by the Western Department, both entities coming under the auspices of the mammoth Bureau of Foreign Relations, or *Krom Tha* (literally "Ports Department").

With the advent of Singapore as a trading and trans-shipment port between east and west, Siam's trade bureaucracy was directly affected. Siam's "Western" trade was nearly wiped out, being supplanted by the trans-shipment by the junk traders between Singapore and Siam. The Singapore phenomenon thus had the effect of accelerating the decline in power of the Western Department, which had been suffering from the absence of European traders since the late Ayutthaya period, while augmenting the scope and authority of the Eastern Department under the control of influential merchants-cum-officials of Chinese origin. Siam's trade thus fell squarely into the firm grip of ethnic Chinese merchants.⁵

³ Song Ong Siang, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore* (Singapore: University Malaya Press, 1967 [1923]), p. 9.

⁴ Sarasin Viraphol, *Tribute and Profit: Sino-Siamese Trade* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1977), pp. 186-9.

⁵ Chulispong Chularat, *Khunnang Krom Tha Khwa* (Officials of the Port Department of the Right), (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 2003), p. 286.

Apart from such administrative effects, the emergence of Singapore—with the attendant two-way trade with Siam—significantly brought to the fore problems and issues relating to the general conduct of trade, stemming from differing trade principles and practices followed by Siam, on the one hand, and the British, now based in Singapore, on the other. Accordingly, the overall problem of bilateral trade of those early days could be viewed from two different perspectives – that of the Siamese and of Singapore, or more precisely, the Straits Settlements, as part of British India.

The Siamese perspective

For the Siamese, the Singapore trade was an additional new dimension that was highly lucrative. It was also a novel experience for Siamese traders who, in the free and open market of Singapore (unlike the closed Chinese market accessible only to privileged Siamese), had to compete with other traders from neighbouring Cochin-China and Java for the same products, like rice, sugar and salt, and yet were able to secure the market. Moreover, through this junk trade, Siam imported diverse products through Singapore, chiefly textiles from India and England, as well as forbidden opium also from India. According to John Crawfurd, the renowned first British envoy to Siam, no other country in the surrounding region had more trade with Singapore than Siam.⁶

The significance of the Singapore trade was not lost on the Siamese leadership, especially the newly enthroned King Rama III. While new possibilities seemed to open up, the tributary system of trade with China gave cause for concern. During the fifty years after the fall of Ayutthaya, trade with China had been the mainstay of the Kingdom's revenues, and brought in income for the Royal Treasury through direct royal trading. However, it had also significantly widened the "field" of trade through "authorized and privileged" trading carried out by "private" players, such as nobles and Chinese merchants, typically acting in consort. Such trade expansion, while benefiting the Kingdom as a whole, had the curious indirect effect of making royal trading less profitable. In light of these prevailing economic realities, the new King, with his vision and trading experience, responded by declaring the cessation of royal trading and a reduction in port charges; at the same time, he decided to make up for the financial loss caused by these changes by resorting to taxation, the collection of which was farmed out to the highest private bidders under what was known as "tax farming," a system of raising state revenue generally recognized in Asian countries.⁷

⁶ John Crawfurd, *Journal of an Embassy from the Governor of India to the Courts of Siam and Cochin-China* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1987 [1828]), p. 542.

⁷ Hong Lysa, *Thailand in the Nineteenth Century: Evolution of the Economy and Society* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1984), Chapter 4, referring to China at p.84; C. M. Turnbull, *The Straits Settlements 1826-1867: Indian Presidency to Crown Colony* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1972), referring to Singapore; and Song Ong Siang, *One Hundred Years' History*, p. 17, referring to Crawfurd as

With regards to Singapore, Siam's new trading partner, the Siamese made a clear distinction between the thriving junk trade, treated as being "local", and the trade carried out by British vessels from Singapore, viewed as part of the European traders who had begun to return to trade at Siamese ports, although still small in number. In the Siamese view, trading with the Europeans was always problematic due to their insistence on their "rights", in stark contrast with preferred fellow Asian traders, who accepted and complied with Siamese trading practices without demur. According to one authoritative source: "the Siamese felt no need for trade with the West – in fact, did not desire competition from Western merchants and were reluctant to sign treaties with the West because of the possible political dangers involved."⁸ This Siamese outlook persisted until the first Anglo-Burmese war in 1825 became "the primary cause" for a major policy shift, leading to the conclusion of the Burney Treaty, the first modern treaty of friendship and the first commercial agreement between Siam and a Western nation.⁹

From the Siamese viewpoint, the Treaty was a political necessity which represented nothing more than what had to be conceded in order to preserve peace and reach political settlement. The trade provisions, however, caused serious concern. Termination of all state participation, as implied therein, would have placed a severe financial burden on the Treasury. In addition, members of the nobility and their Chinese merchant partners were anxious not to lose the benefits gained under the aegis of royal monopolies. Under such internal pressures, a new way of deriving revenue had to be, and was, found in the increased use of the recently introduced tax farming system, which also benefited and could pacify members of the nobility and Chinese merchants because it often turned out that they were the ones who won the tax concessions and became tax farmers.¹⁰

Meanwhile, Siam's trade with China under the tributary system began to falter, due mainly to the penetration of the Chinese market by British traders, principally from Singapore, backed by British political and military pressure to which the Chinese finally succumbed. Siam's advantageous position in the Chinese market inevitably suffered, resulting in increasing losses and aggravating the financial situation, which the Government attempted to redress by turning to other lucrative markets, such as Singapore, and adopting more revenue-raising measures. Apart from more new taxes under the tax farm system, other recourses were found, such as reversion to export control, re-imposition of Court monopolies and even trading by modern vessels of the royal fleet, all of which admittedly affected the few British Singapore trading vessels adversely. This affected party, though small in number,

Resident of Singapore taxing "pleasures, vices and extravagances".

⁸ Walter F. Vella, *Siam under Rama III, 1824-1851* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1957), p. 115.

⁹ Vella, *Siam under Rama III*, pp. 115-117.

¹⁰ Vella, *Siam under Rama III*, p. 127.

made a disproportionately loud “noise”, alleging Siamese infringement of the Burney Treaty. Noticeably, however, there were no strong official British protests.¹¹

Such a state of affairs was allowed to persist until towards the end of King Rama III's reign when the British Government decided to dispatch Sir James Brooke to Siam. The Siamese response was not entirely antagonistic, insisting that the Burney Treaty was still in force and adequate.¹² The Siamese negotiators thus chose to dwell only on procedural matters. Finally, after a few months, negotiations were broken off, with the majority of the ministers, who were the King's old stalwarts, insisting on the status quo against the more liberal and progressive views of the Foreign Minister and his increasingly influential son, Chuang Bunnag. More and more would be heard from the progressive elements in Siamese society in due course, but for the time being, the status quo prevailed.

The British (Singapore) perspective

The title of this subheading is indicative of the complexity of the trade situation as viewed from Singapore. As we have seen, Singapore's junk trade with Siam carried out by the Singapore Chinese merchants was growing smoothly, as was its Siamese counterpart. What posed a problem, however, was the trade conducted by vessels belonging to the British merchants in Singapore, whose number was increasing rapidly. These enterprising Britons—the “founding fathers” of Singapore's economy—were eager to explore and exploit any trade possibilities in the Orient. They were imbued with the philosophy and principles of Free Trade, as expounded by Adam Smith, and more recently spelt out by Raffles as the dogma of Singapore, the free port. As time went by, in actuality and in practice, these British merchants found, to their chagrin, that their beliefs and convictions had to face up to financial realities and difficulties internally, while externally they had to contend with antithetical restrictive trade practices prevailing elsewhere in the region, especially in China and other countries along the lucrative trade route, including Siam.

In such circumstances, these proactive traders could not readily find a remedy for their plight, or even local governmental support, as the administration in Singapore enjoyed only limited authority. From its beginning, Singapore was founded by the British East India Company merely as another base, south from Penang, to protect its expanding China trade; together with Penang and Malacca, as British Straits Settlements, it was governed from Calcutta as part of British India, and was therefore subject to the influence of British Indian policy, which did not necessarily converge with “local” Singapore interests.¹³ In the Calcutta government's view, the Straits

¹¹ Vella, *Siam under Rama III*, p. 128.

¹² O. Frankfurter, “The Mission of Sir James Brooke to Siam (September 1850)”, *JSS*, 8 (1911), p. 26.

¹³ N. J. Ryan, *The Making of Modern Malaysia and Singapore* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 116.

Settlements merely had to “live within its means” and to avoid any complications in the hinterland, meaning the various states in the Malaya Peninsula, some of whom, particularly in the northern part, were experiencing difficulties in their relations with Siam, their suzerain to the north. British India itself was undergoing a drawn-out military engagement with Burma, Siam’s neighbour to the west. It was within this context, or configuration of power, that the trade and other interests of Singapore during the forty years of Indian rule were treated and subjected to the prevailing political considerations.

Take for instance the mission led by John Crawfurd to Siam in 1821. That mission “was camouflaged under the cloak of trade discussions”¹⁴ when, in fact, the real and political reasons were Kedah (Penang) and Burma. It turned out to be a failure because Calcutta did not want to take a hard line against Siam due to the perceived needs of the current political situation in each case.

The Burney mission, which followed in 1825, fared better and resulted in the Burney Treaty comprising both political and commercial provisions. Still true to the “hinterland” policy, the British Indian Government sought basically to reassure the Siamese of its non-hostile dispositions regarding both Burma and the northern Malay states. In relation to commerce, the Treaty contained specific provisions aimed at establishing some regulation and order for the betterment of trade conditions.

The British Straits merchants’ response to the Treaty, while lukewarm on the political aspect, was enthusiastic about the commercial provisions, for they had looked upon Siam as one of the most potentially lucrative markets. Some European commercial firms in Singapore thus tried to break into the Bangkok market directly, but found Siam to be a difficult proposition, for they had to compete with Siamese and Chinese junk masters accustomed to the intricate local “ways.”¹⁵ The Treaty was not directly of much help either. Although the tax problem was simplified by adopting a consolidated duty, calculated on the breadth of the vessel, the other clauses tended to favour the Siamese in practice, such as restrictions on the purchase of goods for export and on the sale of certain imports. All in all, the British Singapore merchants did not find such conditions conducive to trade. What they found to be utterly objectionable was the customary practice of blatant discrimination against Europeans in favour of the locals, including the Chinese, whether in Siam or from Singapore, in every aspect of trade, notably tax rates and travel within the Kingdom. Above all else, the British Singapore merchants believed, and alleged, that the commercial provisions of the Treaty were not being observed, in letter and spirit, by the Siamese Government, citing, for instance, trading by royal vessels or raising of newly “farmed-out” taxes, which latter was,

¹⁴ M.L. Manich Jumsai, *History of Anglo-Thai Relations* (Bangkok: Chalermnit, 1970), p. 35.

¹⁵ Turnbull, *Straits Settlements*, p. 174.

in their eyes, nothing but a circuitous way of taxing exports, and at a very high rate to allow for the tax farmer's margin.¹⁶

The strong reaction of these merchants reflected the increasingly active and vocal role they had assumed in Singapore's own public affairs. In 1837, they established the Singapore Chamber of Commerce, which was also open to prominent Chinese merchants for membership. Throughout the 1840s, the Chamber, as spokesman for the Singapore business community, took up the matter of trade with Siam, and began to exert pressure on the authorities in Singapore, calling for revision of the Treaty and for its stricter enforcement. In fact, this Singapore lobby, including the "*Tuan Besars*", or the heads of prominent European trading houses, who had become quite influential thanks to their successful business operations, was virtually the sole voice in making demands on the various tiers of British governance in order to protect and advance their commercial interests.

At this juncture, brief mention could perhaps be made of Robert Hunter, a British merchant in Bangkok, who is particularly known for his dramatic "rise and fall" from royal grace and favour. What is deemed relevant here has to do with his subsequent actions when he joined others in vehemently accusing King Rama III of infringements of the Burney Treaty.¹⁷ Indeed, by late 1843, Singapore's dissatisfaction with the trade situation in Siam was officially conveyed to Calcutta by Governor Butterworth, citing the King's direct interference as the cause of British grievances. Calcutta, towing the old line of "hands-off Siam", refused "to concern itself with the matter" on the grounds that the King did not appear to have "infringed on any of the provisions of the Treaty."¹⁸ Neither Singapore nor Hunter would, or did, stop however.

The Singapore Chamber of Commerce continued its efforts by seeking and receiving support from its network of allies sharing common commercial interests. In particular, it managed to join force with Chambers of Commerce in textile industry centres in England, whose export of yarns and other products was suffering from a slowdown and in need of new markets. Together, these commercial bodies in Singapore and England made joint representations directly to the British Government in London,¹⁹ and in one such petition mentioned that "Siam offers an immense outlet to British manufactures."²⁰

At the highest level of government in London, many considerations beyond commerce, especially the global strategic standpoint, were bound to come into play.

¹⁶ Vella, *Siam under Rama III*, pp. 139-140.

¹⁷ R. Adey Moore, "An Early British Merchant in Bangkok", *JSS*, 11 (1914-15), p. 30.

¹⁸ *The Burney Papers* (Thai version translated by Savitri Suwannasathit), Vol 14, pp. 113, 139. In the British Singapore view, the Siamese were "circumventing" the treaty, not openly "violating" it for fear of courting disaster.

¹⁹ Nicholas Tarling, "Siam and Sir James Brooke", *JSS*, 48, 2 (1960), p. 48.

²⁰ Frankfurter, "Mission of Sir James Brooke", p. 23.

By the 1840s, British policy towards China had changed, with the abandonment of the East India Company's monopoly and the impact of the Free Trade treaties, and these changes were reflected in British policy towards China's neighbours and tributaries, such as Siam and Cochin-China, where the commercial pressures that influenced the "opening-up" of China might also exist.²¹ With regards to Burma, the saga of Anglo-Burmese confrontation was drawing to a close, thereby lessening the strategic relevance of Siam, against which the British could now afford to take a harder line.

Against this background and taking full account of the representations of various Chambers of Commerce in Singapore and England, the British Government (not the East India Company nor the Indian Government as in the case of the two previous missions) dispatched Sir James Brooke on a mission to Siam with the view of "improving trade relations."²² Thus, Sir James Brooke, the famous Raja of Sarawak, went to Bangkok in 1850, but returned empty-handed. Presumably, Brooke had not anticipated a fruitful outcome, for he is understood to have observed, even before reaching Bangkok, that "time should be given to the work of conciliation.... in the course of this policy we may wait till the demise of the King brings about a new order of things."²³ Soon enough, however, "a new order of things" did come about, as less than a year after Brooke's departure, King Rama III passed away and was succeeded on the throne by his brother, Prince Mongkut (King Rama IV).

III. The convergence

By mid-1851, Britain and Siam stood poised for a re-assessment of their mutual relations. Recent developments in both countries, as well as globally, seemed to bring them closer. The failure of Brooke's mission did not result in the use of force, as originally feared in some Siamese quarters. In fact, Lord Palmerston, the British Foreign Secretary, explicitly ruled out "hostile proceedings" and was in favour of pursuing "the traditional policy towards Siam", thereby scotching any pro-hostility sentiments being debated in interested circles, including the Singapore business community.²⁴ The preponderant British Singapore merchants, who had all along favoured negotiation with Siam, were now even more determined to push for a new treaty along the lines of the Nanking Treaty, earlier concluded between Britain and China.²⁵

Around that same time, there arose in China a new situation that would prove to be beneficial to the Singapore merchants' cause. As a consequence of the most

²¹ Tarling, *Siam and Sir James Brooke*, p. 47.

²² Frankfurter, "Mission of Sir James Brooke", p. 25

²³ Tarling, *Siam and Sir James Brooke*, pp. 49-50.

²⁴ Tarling, *Siam and Sir James Brooke*, p. 60.

²⁵ D. R. SarDesai, *British Trade and Expansion in Southeast Asia 1830-1914* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1977), pp. 83-84.

favoured nation treatment dictated by the Nanking Treaty, British manufactured goods in the open market of China faced severe competition from those produced by other Western nations, resulting in the poor performance of British exports to China. Again, British commercial interests in both Manchester and in Canton (Guangzhou), where Singapore merchants—both British and Chinese—were very active, took up the matter, urging the Government in London to explore the possibility of new markets in Asia. The Government accordingly decided to entrust Sir John Bowring, Governor of Hong Kong, in 1854 with the task of widening British commercial interests beyond China into other countries, such as Japan, Siam and Cochin-China.²⁶

Meanwhile, in Siam, King Rama IV's ascension to the throne in 1851 caused a sea change that would transform every aspect of the landscape of the country. The new King, who had a profound interest in world affairs, had seen what happened when China tried to shut out the Western powers. He was determined that Siam would not follow the Chinese example, had to break with the conservative isolationism of the recent past, and thus admit foreign trade and foreign ideas.²⁷ Indeed, actions along such lines in the field of trade were taken by the King soon after his ascension, chief among which were: the reduction of measurement duties, the partial lifting of the ban on rice exports and likewise with the import of opium.

Against this backdrop, Bowring proceeded to Bangkok in April 1855, negotiated and concluded a Treaty within three weeks.²⁸ Leaving aside the generally well known cataclysmic effects of the Bowring Treaty on the entire Siamese polity for many decades thereafter, it would serve our immediate purpose if we are merely to consider the Treaty, firstly, as evidence of the convergence of the two hitherto opposing trade policies and practices, which could only, and did, come about, thanks to the many changes in the geopolitical situation, including the China factor. Secondly, as the directly affected stakeholder, the Singapore mercantile community had played an important role in influencing and coalescing the “global” disparate interests of the British. It has even been asserted that the “re-opening” of Siam to Western trade by virtue of the Bowring Treaty, in the final analysis, benefited mainly the Singapore British merchants, and was aimed at cultivating the goodwill of the Straits Government.²⁹ Finally, the Bowring Treaty would provide the subsequent legal framework under which bilateral relations of every aspect, including trade, between Siam and the British Straits Settlements were to be conducted for the next seventy years.

²⁶ SarDesai, *British Trade and Expansion*, p. 89.

²⁷ A. B. Griswold, *King Mongkut of Siam* (New York: Asia Society, 1961), p. 1.

²⁸ Hong, *Thailand in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 67.

²⁹ Xie Shunyu, *Siam and the British 1874-75: Sir Andrew Clarke and the Front Palace Crisis* (Bangkok: Thammasat University Bookstore, 1988), p. 61. In welcoming King Chulalongkorn at the time of his visit to Singapore in 1871, Thomas Scott, Chairman of the Singapore Chamber of Commerce, expressed his gratitude for the Siamese “support” for their trade.

IV. King Rama IV and Singapore: A window on the world

In age, King Rama IV was senior to Singapore by fifteen years, having been born in 1804. By the time the Prince entered the priesthood in 1824, where he remained for the next twenty-seven years, Singapore was beginning its rise to prosperity and achieving Raffles vision of becoming “a great commercial Emporium.” Singapore’s success as a trading port and transportation and communication centre, with its East-West persona, combined to make it a unique phenomenon in which the fruits of Western technological progress were being brought right into the heart of Asia.

Prince, priest, student

The future King Rama IV’s “thirst for knowledge”³⁰ would lead him into many fields of study, from geography, world history and mathematics to various branches of science, especially astronomy. His primary interest, however, was the Buddhist religion where his “rational and puritanical reforms...saved a dying religion.”³¹ Viewing the English language as a key to learning, the Prince applied himself to studying it from the American missionaries in Bangkok, who were mostly medical doctors, “purveying” not only the Christian religion, but also modern science and technology. They were, therefore, regarded as the agents of modernity by the populace, from the elite down to the grassroots. Significantly, it was mainly through these American missionaries, particularly the renowned Dr. Dan B. Bradley, that Singapore became widely known to the Siamese, especially Prince Mongkut.

The American missionaries were familiar with Singapore, for they normally stopped over, en route, to make necessary preparations for the rigours of life in Siam. The voluminous writings of the missionaries reveal the intimate friendship between them and the Prince, who not only learned from them but, through their intermediary, acquired books, maps or even the newest kinds of scientific instruments, such as a lithographic press. Such “modern” articles were shipped to the Prince from, or via, Singapore where he had agents, Chinese and English, acting on his behalf. His Chinese agent, named Tan Tock Seng, was the prominent leader of the Chinese community in early Singapore, whose distinguished career as a philanthropist has been memorialized in the prestigious hospital named after him. It is not known as to when or how he became the Prince’s agent, or whether he himself ever visited Bangkok and met the Prince. We know only that this resourceful merchant was actively involved in the Singapore-Bangkok junk trade, and once had a vessel built in Bangkok with all the modern equipment and high capacity, but with rigging in the style of a junk, which could thus pass off as such, and consequently incur the lower tax rate levied by the Siamese Customs in comparison with a modern British

³⁰ Manich, *History of Anglo-Thai Relations*, p. 51

³¹ Donald C. Lord, *Mo Bradley and Thailand* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Erdmans, 1969), p. 160.

vessel of the same size and load.³² His family's association with Siam continued, with his eldest son and heir, Tan Kim Ching, serving as the first Siamese Consul in Singapore.

As for the Prince, through his contact and correspondence with his "pen" friends in Singapore, he became quite knowledgeable about world affairs. In one instance, commenting on the lack of safety in shipping things via China due to piracy, he noted, "but in Singapore there will not be any calamity for protection of English government."³³ The Prince was well aware of his politically delicate situation, and tried to steer clear of the affairs of state.³⁴ Yet, he regularly corresponded with Governor Butterworth in Singapore, whom he considered a "familiar and intimate friend." The Prince was also in the habit of sending his personal attendants on errands to Singapore where they were received by the Governor.³⁵

King, scholar, diplomat

Despite the heavy load of royal duties, King Mongkut kept up the fond practice of writing to friends in Singapore and elsewhere around the world, including Sir John Bowring and even some heads of state. Singapore, in particular, continued to be his "contact-point" with the outside world, and even caused him to experience a bitter taste of Western press "freedom" once, when an anonymous uncomplimentary article about him was published in the Singapore Straits Times.³⁶ Singapore was certainly evolving into a crossroads where Europeans of all nationalities preferred to congregate. Indeed, Anna Leonowens, the English governess at the court of the King of Siam, was recruited from cosmopolitan Singapore. She was interviewed for the post by William Adamson, an English merchant and long-standing friend of the King, with whom he carried on correspondence until the end of his life.³⁷ Personal contact thus formed part of the King's strategy of "opening-up" to the West, from which he was convinced that Siam would derive only benefit.

³² *The Burney Papers* (Thai version), p. 116.

³³ Prince Mongkut's Letter to Mr. & Mrs. Eddy of New York, dated 18 November 1849, in *Phrarachahattalekha nai Phrabatsomdet Phrajomklaoyaoyuhua jat phim doi khana kammakan amnuai kan jat ngan chaloemphrakiat Phrabatsomdet Phrajomklaoyaoyuhua jat phim pen thi raluek nai okat thi wan phraborommarachasomphop khrop 200 pi* (Collection of the King Mongkut's correspondence published by the committee for the bicentenary celebration as a memorial on the 200th anniversary of his birth), Office of Literature and History, Fine Arts Department, 18 October 2004, p. 10.

³⁴ M.L. Manich Jumsai, *King Mongkut of Siam and the British* (Bangkok: Chalermnit, 1999), p. 60, quoting the Prince's letter to Messrs. Hamilton Grey, his Singapore agent, at the time of Sir James Brooke's mission to Bangkok in which the Prince was involved as a mere "translator".

³⁵ "English Correspondence of King Mongkut", *JSS*, 22, 1 (1928), p. 3.

³⁶ Lord, *Mo Bradley and Thailand*, p. 172. For some unknown reason, the King attributed this article to Samuel J. Smith, an experienced missionary who was, in reality, the King's strong proponent.

³⁷ King Mongkut's Letter to Mr. W. Adamson, dated 27 February 1862, in *Phrarachahattalekha nai Phrabatsomdet Phrajomklaoyaoyuhua*, p. 416.

The first embassy, or goodwill mission, sent to London in 1857, heralded the arrival of Siam on the world stage. That delegation stopped over in Singapore where it was welcomed with full honours by the Straits Settlements authorities for whom it was also the first ever occasion to receive an official mission from Siam. A detailed record of that historic embassy was written by Mom Rajothai, the official interpreter, who also rendered it in verse form, known as “Niras London,” depicting the modern vibrant city of Singapore and the favourable impression made on the Siamese envoys as well. This famous travelogue was later published by Dr. Bradley, who ran a printing press, and had bought its copyright from the poet-author for Baht 400, being the first such transaction in Siamese history.

Commerce between Singapore and Siam, meanwhile, had grown considerably since the Bowring Treaty, with emphasis on the rice trade. Modern technology had brought about faster and more efficient means of transportation and communication. Indeed, steamships were now plying international routes via Singapore. Even on the Bangkok-Singapore sector, an enterprising Sino-Siamese merchant, named Yim, launched his steamer called “Chao Phya” carrying passengers and mail with much success.³⁸ The regular courier service provided by the “Chao Phya” became the King’s line of communication with the outside world through the “window” provided by Singapore. Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, the pre-eminent historian and a son of King Mongkut, recalled how significant a part the delivery of the mail— correspondence and newspapers—played in the King’s routine, as he would spend a few days each week on his correspondence. The Prince also clearly recalled the thrill of seeing, and tasting, for the first time the newfangled “ice” imported from Singapore by the same steamer.³⁹

King Mongkut’s acquired proficiency in astronomy has been accorded a special place in Thai history on account of its relevance to Siam’s relations with the Straits Settlements. It led to his meeting Sir Harry Ord, the new Governor, who was the King’s guest to witness a solar eclipse and was greatly impressed with his accurate prediction. Sir Harry was even more impressed with the King himself, as evidenced in his report to London, stressing that benefits from his visit would “render easier the settlement of those questions” concerning Siamese claims to suzerainty over the northern Malay states, which previous Governors, unlike Sir Harry, had tended to belittle. Even though Sir Harry’s thinking, along the line of respective spheres of influence, implied a recognition of Siamese suzerainty that never formally

³⁸ The vessel’s owner, a protégé of the King, was a highly successful business leader in many areas. He is known to posterity as the man who constructed the “Phasee Charoen” canal, named after him. His final title was Phya Bisonth Sombat Boribun, founder of the “Bisalyaputra” family and ancestor of the female line of the “Kitiyakara” (royal) family to which Her Majesty Queen Sirikit belongs.

³⁹ Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, *Khwam Songjam* (Memoirs) (Bangkok: Thai Historical Association, 1966), p. 19.

materialized, the goodwill generated by his meetings with the King served to seal a “rapprochement” for the time being.⁴⁰

The King continued relentlessly with his “personal diplomacy”, not only to promote relations, but also to deal with actual problems arising out of the extraterritorial jurisdiction granted to the Western countries by the Bowring Treaty (and other subsequent treaties). Such problems often involved the objectionable actions of the foreign consulates in Bangkok or the personal behaviour of the consuls themselves. The crux of the matter was that there was hardly any channel open to Siam to bring such problems to the attention of the higher authorities of those Western Powers. The only recourse would be for Siam to have her own consulates in those countries. Significantly, as affirmed by the Siamese Foreign Minister, there were also the “needs to take care of the vessels belonging to the rich Chinese merchants (“*Jae Sua*”) in Bangkok sent to trade at Singapore yearly under the protection of Siam (“*Krung Thai*”), flying the Elephant flag (“*Thong Chang*”)”.⁴¹

Singapore was therefore singled out as the foremost candidate for a Siamese consulate. The venerable British merchant and public servant of early Singapore, W.H. Read, through his close association with Tan Kim Ching, the King’s loyal agent, proffered his advice as early as 1861 on appointing Siamese consuls in Europe.⁴² In late 1862, the King approached Tan Kim Ching to appoint him as Siamese Consul in Singapore; he agreed and advised Bangkok on the correct procedure to be followed, since the Siamese Government had never previously appointed any consul. Once the agreement of the British Government had been obtained for the establishment of Siamese consulates in British territories, the Siamese Government proceeded to appoint Tan Kim Ching as Consul for Singapore and two other British gentlemen as Consuls for Penang and Rangoon respectively. Tan Kim Ching’s appointment was the first to receive British recognition, and he was formally confirmed by Royal Proclamation, dated 21 October 1863, making him the first Siamese Consul in Asia, preceded by a similar consular appointment in Paris by just a few months. Siam was thus accorded a permanent presence in the land, which had for so long been its “window” on the world.

V. Siamese presence: consulate and “listening post”

In October 1863, the Siamese flag, red with an emblazoned white elephant at

⁴⁰ Manich Jumsai, *King Mongkut of Siam*, p. 87, footnote; C. D. Cowan, *Nineteenth-Century Malaya* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 61.

⁴¹ National Archives of Thailand (NAT): Foreign Affairs Series, Microfilm Filed Document [Mor KorTor (Lor) 15 / 110], Note from Foreign Minister to Mr. Tan Kim Ching, dated 11 December 1862.

⁴² *Ibid.* Notes from Mr. W.H. Read to Mr. Tan Kim Ching, as conveyed to Foreign Affairs, Bangkok for the King’s attention.

the centre, was hoisted for the first time atop a modern building belonging to Tan Kim Ching's mother at Boat Quay in the heart of the commercial quarters of old Singapore; this would function as the office of the Siamese Consulate for the next thirty years.⁴³

For Tan Kim Ching, known in Thai as Phra Pidet Panich, the Royal appointment as Consul was merely formalization of his service to the King during the previous fourteen years since his father's death. He continued his father's business with great success, particularly in the rice trade, and became an influential figure within the Chinese communities of northern Malaya, thereby making it possible for him to contribute towards the solution of the political problems arrived at by the Siamese and Straits Governments. His appointment as Governor of the tin-rich Siamese province of Kraburi (present-day Ranong), where the strategic Kra Isthmus is situated, as well as his aborted attempts to secure concessions for revenue farming in southern Siam deserve separate attention.⁴⁴

Within the confines of his consular responsibilities, Phya Asdong, as Tan was soon entitled to be called, fulfilled his consular duties in an exemplary manner, obviously facilitated by his position and prestige in both the Chinese and European communities of Singapore. On the Siamese side, the Consul was blessed with the King's trust and confidence, and enjoyed close and friendly relations with the Siamese Foreign Ministers he served. In the day-to-day running of the Consulate, the Consul had to deal with all types of consular work, including the routine chore of looking after ships' crews and conveying official information back and forth.

The so-called "religious" aspect of consular work was also an important part of the job, then as now, and is illustrated by the case of a misbehaving heretical Buddhist monk on the rampage in Singapore, who had to be captured and repatriated. Also, the plight of Muslim pilgrims from southern Siam left stranded and penniless in Singapore en route to Mecca, victims of unscrupulous brokers, was even then a serious problem. Human trafficking, though not then known as such, presented itself too. There was the case of two Siamese maidens smuggled into Singapore and kept in slavery until rescued. Fugitives of all sorts, from real slaves fleeing their "lawful" masters to debtors escaping their creditors, were chased to Singapore, requiring the Consulate to act as intermediary. Once, the Consul reported to Bangkok about a nasty incident involving a Consular officer and an ill-mannered, aggressive junior Government official on his way from Bangkok in charge of a consignment of cultural

⁴³ The building was mortgaged to the Siamese Government, without interest, redeemable by annual repayments within ten years, during which no rent was to be paid by the Government.

⁴⁴ There is an interesting account and analysis of that episode of Mr. Tan Kim Ching's career in Jennifer W. Cushman's *Family and State: The Formation of a Sino-Thai Tin-Mining Dynasty, 1797-1932* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 32-37. His final royally bestowed title was Phya Anukul Siamkij. Through one of his daughters, Khun Chun Virangkul, he was the maternal grandfather of Thanphuying Molee Khoman, wife of Dr. Thanat Khoman, Foreign Minister of Thailand and founding father of ASEAN.

objects destined for the international exhibition in Paris. In response, the Foreign Minister expressed regret for his inaction, noting that the Government official, though junior in rank, was under the wings of someone “high-up”. The Consul and his deputy were not always on good terms—not a rare phenomenon—to the extent that the Consul once had to report to Bangkok about his recalcitrant deputy disappearing surreptitiously with the Consulate’s seal and severely disrupting the work of the Consulate!⁴⁵

However, such “knotty” consular matters were not the only areas of concern for the Consul. There were others, less bothersome, which required considerably more skill and experience. Apart from being a communications hub, Singapore had by that time also become an imaginary arena where the international political game was played out through the moves and manoeuvres of the Western Powers, who were all represented there. Singapore, in modern parlance, had become an ideal “listening post.” Phya Asdong, the Siamese Consul, applied himself to such a challenging task with fervour. He regularly reported to Bangkok on developments on this front and, in particular, provided information about French designs on Cambodia, which was then the focus of interest for the Siamese (and for the British in Singapore). The Consul often developed a well-reasoned analysis, thanks to his broad range of contacts and connections. Sometimes, instructions would come from Bangkok for the Consul to pursue a particular matter. When the Foreign Minister read a newspaper report about China’s plans to open consulates in several countries, including Siam, he directed the Consul to check on its accuracy, for this had always been a potentially sensitive issue for the Siamese Government, which wanted to understand the reaction of the British and other Governments. For the Consul’s outstanding political intelligence work, he received high commendations from the Foreign Minister.⁴⁶

Protocol was another important aspect of the Consulate’s duties, for there were already frequent visits of official delegations and dignitaries. Chao Phya Sri Suriyawongse (Chuang Bunnag), Senior Minister during King Rama IV’s reign and Regent under King Rama V, visited Singapore more than once and made acquaintance with many prominent figures.⁴⁷ The most challenging protocol work, however, was the preparation for the visit of young King Chulalongkorn in 1871; the Consul had earlier been instructed to ascertain discreetly the Straits Government’s reaction to the idea of a visit and to ensure that appropriate courtesies and honours would be accorded.

⁴⁵ NAT, op. cit., and NAT Microfilm Filed Document Kor Ror 5 Kor Tor (Lor)/3, /17 and /55.

⁴⁶ Ibid. The then Foreign Minister was Chao Phya Thipakornwong (Kham Bunnag).

⁴⁷ As reported by Consul Tan Kim Ching in NAT documents, see footnote 39. In Datin Patricia Lim Pui Huen, *Through the Eyes of the King: The Travels of King Chulalongkorn to Malaya* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2009), there are references and pictures of the celebrated Chinese millionaire, Whampoa, and his ornamental garden where the magnificent lotus, *Victoria Regia*, presented by the Regent of Siam, grew in the famous circular pond.



The famous pond in the magnificent garden of the millionaire, Whampoa, in which grew the magnificent lotus, the *Victoria Regia*, presented by the Regent of Siam (A.E.H. Anson, *About Myself and Others, 1745-1920*)

VI. King Chulalongkorn and Singapore

King Chulalongkorn was only fifteen years old when he ascended the throne, thus necessitating the appointment by the Succession Council of Chao Phya Sri Suriyawongse as Regent who, incidentally, thus became the most powerful public figure in the land. The Regent was well known for his liberal and progressive ideas from his younger days, and had accumulated considerable practical experience in foreign affairs under King Rama IV. At the King's behest, he visited Singapore in 1861 "to study and consider the ways and means by which the British had developed and brought progress to Singapore."⁴⁸ Not surprisingly, as Regent, this veteran of Siamese diplomacy favoured Singapore as the first foreign land for the youthful King to visit. Thus began the saga of King Chulalongkorn's association with Singapore throughout the forty-two years of his reign (1868-1910).

Royal "study tour"

Still an adolescent, King Chulalongkorn had been well trained by his father and inherited many of his attributes, such as a thirst for knowledge and a profound interest in foreign affairs. Above all, the young King had set his heart on bringing progress in every respect to his country, but Siam at that time sorely lacked the necessary infrastructure required for modernization. Singapore, on the other hand, had become known as a model in which Western technological advance found its manifestation in an Eastern setting.

The King and his entourage thus spent over a week in Singapore, seeing,

⁴⁸ Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, *Khon Dee Thi Khapachao Ruujak* (Good people I have known) (Bangkok: Anon, 2006), Vol. 2, p. 96. As regards the Regent's previous role in the negotiations of the Bowring Treaty, see Nicholas Tarling, "The Mission of Sir John Bowring to Siam", *JSS*, 50, 2 (1962), pp. 96-97.



Johnston's Pier where King Chulalongkorn landed in 1896 (Charles J. Kleingrothe, *Malay Peninsula*, 1907)

inspecting and learning everything on offer in the very tight programme of a “study tour.” He visited the post office, the telegraph office, the fire brigade, a hospital, a school, a market, a shipyard and a jail.⁴⁹ Many of these examples soon materialized in Bangkok, such as modern buildings and roads. Aside from the “material” aspect, the workings of a modern system of administration in Singapore could not but provide inspiration for the King’s future reform of the antiquated governmental system, both on the civil and military sides. Singapore thus became “the first foreign land visited by a Siamese Monarch, on the 16th March, 1871”, according to the inscription at the base of the bronze elephant statue presented by King Chulalongkorn to the people of Singapore as a memento of his first visit, which today still stands in front of Parliament House.⁵⁰

The overall impact of the “study tour” found expression in what is known today as “technical assistance and co-operation” in many areas. On a wider perspective, Siamese diplomacy thereafter broadened its horizons beyond the traditional focus of trade, and entered a new phase wherein foreign relations would be geared towards the goals of modernization and progress of the country, and even survival of its independence.

Goodwill derived from the King's first visit to Singapore

During that historic first visit, King Chulalongkorn was not only impressed with what he saw, but was also able to create a favourable impression on those with

⁴⁹ Lim, *Through the Eyes of the King*, p. 159.

⁵⁰ Lim, *Through the Eyes of the King*, 38, 39.



The bronze elephant, presented to Singapore by King Chulalongkorn in 1872 as a memento of his first visit, now in front of the Arts House, formerly Parliament House, with the inscription in Chinese, Thai, English and Malay. (Courtesy: *From Hurricane House to Royal Thai Embassy Singapore*)

whom he came into contact. They saw that although young, he was an earnest ruler eager to learn and prepare himself to lead his country into the modern world. The King, on his part, had learnt from his father the value of cultivating the goodwill of British colonial officers whose personal views and personalities, no less than official policy, had a bearing on Siamese interests due to the latitude afforded them by the poor communication system of the time.⁵¹ Apart from the opportunity of becoming

⁵¹ Lim, *Through the Eyes of the King*, p. 160.

acquainted with senior British officials during his first visit, the King also succeeded in publicly demonstrating his acumen through the speeches he made in response to the warm welcome he received from the Singapore business community, both European and Chinese. His affirmation of his father's policy of friendly relations with the West was much appreciated by the Europeans, while the Chinese business leaders expressed gratitude for the Royal benevolence traditionally bestowed on the Chinese people living in Siam. The King thus made new friends, and also met old ones, such as the eminent W.H. Read and Major F.J.A. McNair, the engineer who would continue to be a vital contact for technical co-operation for years to come.

In fact, by the time of the King's visit in 1871, Singapore itself had already undergone significant political transformation—from a possession under Indian rule into a Crown Colony administered directly from London; this would soon be followed by a major shift in British policy with “intervention” in the Malay states, which Calcutta had previously avoided and over which the issue of Siamese suzerainty still lingered. The ever-enterprising Singapore merchants, on their part, had all along striven for such intervention, allegedly to restore law and order and to “co-opt” the tin-rich Malay states as their own “backyard”, to rival the Dutch, Spanish and French, who were establishing a “closed” market in their respective spheres of influence—a phenomenon causing some concern in London.⁵² It was at this juncture that Sir Andrew Clarke entered the scene as the new Governor of the Straits Settlements; to this day, he is still remembered as the champion of British interventionist policy, signalling the advent of the British colonial era in Malaya.

A year after the end of the Regency in 1873, King Chulalongkorn was faced with a serious threat to his rule by what has come to be known as “The Front Palace (*Wang Na*) Crisis”, which broke out when Prince Vijaya-jan, the Front Palace Prince and heir presumptive, fearing that his life was under threat from the King, took refuge in the British Consulate. Bangkok was in a state of panic amidst fears of active foreign intervention that might affect Siam's sovereignty. Fearful of the possible involvement of European powers and having secured an official British assurance of neutrality, the King, as part of his diplomatic offensive, wrote to Sir Andrew Clarke so that the latter “should properly appreciate the facts of the crisis”, to which the reply enthusiastically welcomed the King's trust “although there exists between us no relations other than my sympathy”, and affirmed his readiness to assist while waiting for “accreditation” from London. Once that came, Sir Andrew forthwith proceeded to Bangkok, promptly discharged his “rescue” mission by duly performing the task of mediation in accordance with the rules of international law and managed to arrive at a solution which, in effect, was the maintenance of the “status quo” and the strengthening of the King's position as well

⁵² Cowan, *Nineteenth-Century Malaya*, pp. 23-27.

as of Anglo-Siamese friendly relations. Significantly, Clarke, the “interventionist” in Malaya, never equated the situation in Siam with that in Malaya prior to British intervention.⁵³

In retrospect, the peaceful settlement of the internal “dynastic” Siamese dispute was made possible by many favourable factors,⁵⁴ among which was the mutual esteem between the King and Sir Andrew who, through their prior correspondence and the King’s own reputation, had been very much impressed with the “progressive-minded” young king. They kept up their lifelong contact amidst growing trust and confidence as evidenced, for instance, by the King informing Sir Andrew a year later that he had decided to defer further plans for reform, this having aroused strong opposition among the “old guard” and precipitated the crisis. Their last meeting in London in 1897 was especially heartening for the old soldier-governor, who had feared that the King might have “forgotten the service I rendered him and Siam in 1875.”⁵⁵

Technical co-operation: education

The “study tour” during King Chulalongkorn’s first visit generated considerable interest and opportunities for the Siamese to seek co-operation from Singapore for Siam’s own modernization. Records abound of the many types of technical co-operation that were arranged through the Siamese Consulate, such as a follow-up study mission on the prison system, requests for military trainers, artisans including Chinese carpenters, and even sturdy Arabian horses for breeding.⁵⁶ However, by far the most significant outcome of the study tour was in the field of education.

During his short stay in Singapore, the King visited Raffles Institution, which made a lasting impression. It so happened that not long after the King’s return to Siam, he set up the first “teaching hall” for children to learn to read and write. At about the same time, fourteen young students from the junior princely rank were selected to attend Raffles Institution; they accompanied the King on his journey to Singapore in December 1871, when he briefly stopped en route to India. The school authorities were very co-operative and even set up a separate department to accommodate their special needs.⁵⁷ Unfortunately, after only a short stay, most of these pioneer “overseas students” returned to Siam to attend the newly established

⁵³ Xie, *Siam and the British*, p. 45. In the course of mediating, Sir Andrew listened to all the parties concerned, chiefly the King, the Prince and the Regent, and came up with a draft resolution in the form of a royal decree agreed to and affirmed by the two sides.

⁵⁴ Xie, *Siam and the British*, p. 57, referring to the King’s conciliatory attitude towards his royal cousin who, on his part, had no choice but to accept what Clarke had arranged; and *Ibid*, pp. 63-64, referring to the timing of the crisis and the current British policy of non-intervention and the upholding of the status quo in Siam.

⁵⁵ Xie, *Siam and the British*, p. 61.

⁵⁶ NAT, *op.cit.* and NAT Microfilm Filed Document Kor Ror 5 Kor Tor (Lor) / 3, /17 and /55.

⁵⁷ Lim, *Through the Eyes of the King*, pp. 14, 24.



Raffles Institution (Arnold Wright & H.A. Cartwright, *Twentieth Century Impressions of British Malaya*, 1908)

English language school. A few stayed on and completed their studies at Raffles Institution and, with their knowledge of English, became the first generation of bureaucrats in the Siamese administrative service; notable among them was the versatile Prince Prisdang Jumsai, the first Siamese envoy posted to London with accreditation to the rest of Europe and the USA. Raffles Institution and other renowned Singapore schools continued to provide children of the Siamese elite with an education in English for many decades thereafter, with the result that by the turn of the 20th century, the staff of the Siamese Foreign Ministry had mostly been Singapore educated.⁵⁸

Raffles Institution also became a contemporaneous model for a boarding school established in Siam called Rajavidhyalai, where young men would be prepared for study in England and Europe. That school was later merged with another to form the prestigious Vajiravudh College. Singapore's progress in female education also attracted royal interest. Queen Saovabha, the King's Consort, paid a number of visits to famous girls' schools while staying in Singapore in 1896,⁵⁹ which proved valuable for Her Majesty, who had been instrumental in founding and running Rachini (Queen's) School in Bangkok, and had extended her patronage to other

⁵⁸ Examples include Mom Chao Chek Napawongse, one of the 14 "pioneers" and another Mom Chao of the same family name called Karnchiak, who were both Heads of Department; also Phya Maitri Virajakij (Phoom Bunnag), the senior Deputy Under-Secretary of State, who was renowned for his written English.

⁵⁹ Lim, *Through the Eyes of the King*, p. 90.



Tan Kim Ching, Siam's First Consul-General in Singapore (Arnold Wright & H.A. Cartwright, *Twentieth Century Impressions of British Malaya*, 1908) John Anderson, Siam's Second Consul-General in Singapore (Courtesy: River Books, Thailand)

girls' schools around the country. Educational co-operation from those early days notably continues to the present day.

Planting roots

Ever since the first direct contact between Singapore and Siam through the “unofficial” mission of John Morgan in 1821, Singapore never ceased to interest or fascinate the Siamese leadership. During the audiences granted to John Morgan, both King Rama II and the future King Rama III showed immense interest in the newly established Singapore. Less than thirty years later, King Rama IV corresponded regularly with friends in Singapore, which became his window on the world. He even acquired some real estate on Beach Road as his private property, which was handed down to his son, King Chulalongkorn.⁶⁰

The first “root” officially implanted by Siam in Singapore was the establishment of the Siamese Consulate in 1863. However, the Consulate would not be housed in any landed property belonging to the Siamese Government during the next century. The first piece of land ever owned by the Siamese Government was acquired in 1867, not as premises for the Consulate, but for use as a cemetery for Siamese nationals, at the recommendation of Tan Kim Ching, the first Consul. Apparently, this seventy-acre plot in Telok Blangah was never actually put to

⁶⁰ NAT Document (Mor Ror 5 Tor / 61).

such use, and was left virtually vacant until it was compulsorily purchased by the local authorities for town-planning purposes in the 1920s.⁶¹ A more felicitous acquisition was that of Hurricane House, which figured prominently as King Chulalongkorn's residence and the venue of sumptuous receptions during his many visits to Singapore. Regrettably, due to the high maintenance cost, the Government disposed of it towards the end of the King's reign.⁶²

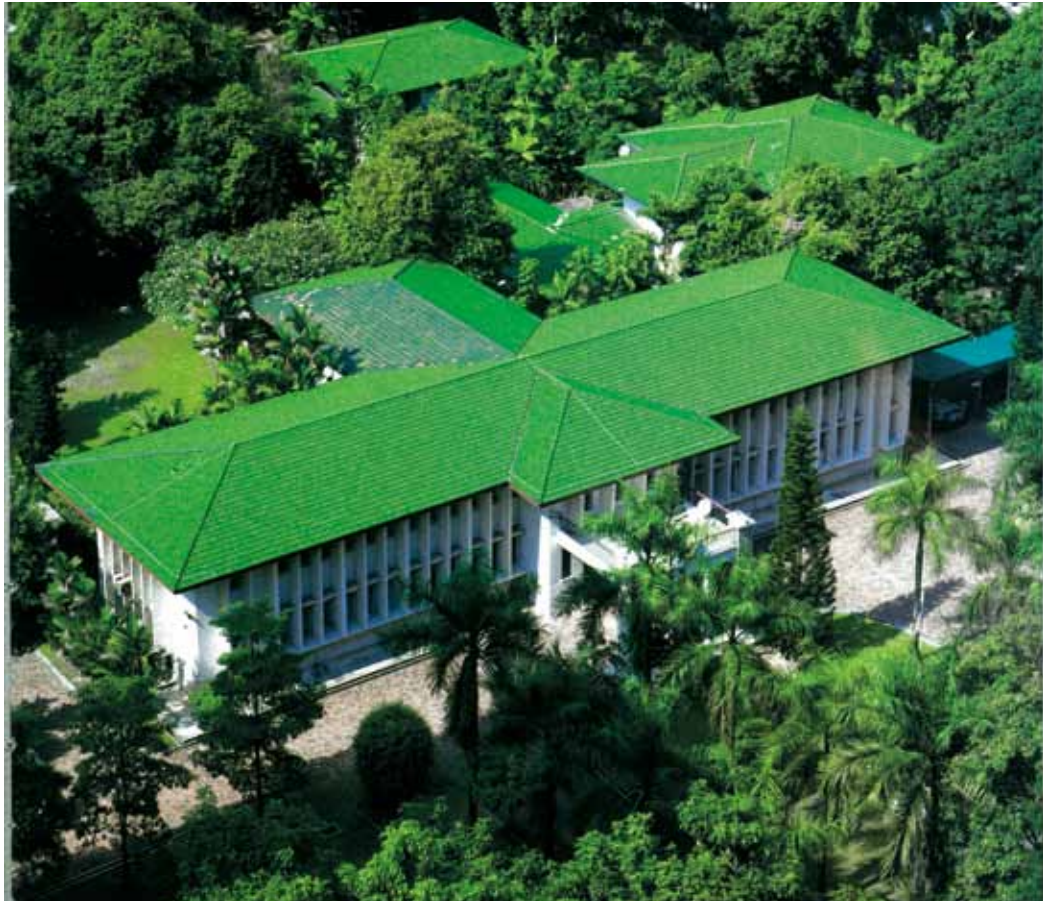
A longer lasting "root" was the piece of land that used to be part of the grand Claymore Estate, where today stands the Royal Thai Embassy, at 370 Orchard Road. This five-acre plot was acquired and registered at the Singapore Land Registry in 1897 under the name of Mr. (later Sir) John Anderson, who succeeded Tan Kim Ching as Siamese Consul in 1893. The rather curious history of this valuable property only came to light when in the mid-1950s, the Thai Government decided to build a Consulate complex on the land, which had been registered since 1909 as Government property with the Ministry of Finance, as distinguished from Crown property. It was then discovered that the land was still registered under Anderson's name and, in the view of the Singapore authorities, ought to be transferred to the Thai Government, which claimed ownership but was unable to produce a supporting title deed. Sir John Anderson had long passed away, leaving his widow and a son, who confirmed that his father had held the land as representative of King Chulalongkorn. The Thai Government, on its part, as prospective transferee, had to prove that the land was not the private property of the King, but belonged to the Government by producing an affidavit from the Thai Ministry of Finance affirming its ownership, as evidenced by the official registration and Singapore land tax receipts, and notarized by the British Embassy in Bangkok. Lady Anderson, already in very poor health, then signed in London the deed transferring the land to the Thai Government, which was forthwith registered at the Singapore Land Registry in January 1960, only a matter of days before her death.⁶³ The construction was completed later that year, and since then the Royal Thai Consulate, later Embassy, has stood there.

The Thai presence in modern Singapore thus owes its origin to an official inheritance bequeathed by the far-sighted King Chulalongkorn, whose last visit to Singapore took place in 1907, three years before his death. Thus ended the saga of the long friendship and goodwill between the King and old Singapore, his favourite "gateway."

⁶¹ NAT Document [Mor KorTor (Lor) 15 /110] and (Mor Ror 6/53). The final disposition by compulsory purchase was confirmed by the Royal Thai Embassy, Singapore, under Ambassador Nopadol Goonavibool, in early 2011.

⁶² Ambassador Nibondh Wilairat, "Hurricane House", published in *Saranrom* magazine (1970), pp. 26-29. Ambassador Wilairat was the first Thai Ambassador to Singapore. He had previously served there as Consul-General.

⁶³ Nibondh, "Hurricane House", pp. 134-136.



The Royal Thai Embassy at 370 Orchard Road (Courtesy: *From Hurricane House to Royal Thai Embassy Singapore*)

VII. Postscript: The 20th century

King Chulalongkorn was succeeded by two sons in succession. King Vajiravudh (King Rama VI) ascended the throne in 1910 and, after a fifteen-year reign, was succeeded by his younger brother, Prajadhipok, who became King Rama VII and reigned from 1925 until his abdication in 1934, after the transformation from the absolute to constitutional monarchy in 1932. With the nation's independence preserved, King Rama VI could now set out to regain those aspects of state sovereignty lost under the foreign "unequal" treaties. Renegotiation and conclusion of new treaties based on equality was a major foreign policy goal which, after prolonged efforts, were eventually successful. One of the major losses that Siam suffered under these "unequal" treaties was reflected in the imposition of the extraterritorial regime in favour of the Western powers. In this regard, Britain led the way in lessening the rigours of the system as early as 1909, just before the King's ascension. Under the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of that year, Britain renounced her extraterritorial rights in Siam in exchange for the four Siamese dominions in northern Malaya, long viewed as "a thorn in the side" of Anglo-Siamese relations, which consequently could now



A group photo taken in Singapore in 1896: (L to R) Prince Rajburi Direkridhhi, Phraya Apaironrith (Wek Yamapai), Prince Bisanulok Prajanath, King Chulalongkorn, John Anderson, Prince Damrong Rajanubhap (Courtesy: River Books, Thailand)

proceed into calmer waters.⁶⁴ This outcome may help to explain why frequent visits to Malaya and Singapore, as undertaken by King Chulalongkorn, were no longer considered necessary.

King Rama VI visited Singapore and Malaya only once during his reign, in 1924. Sometime before the visit, the King demonstrated the importance he attached to Singapore by appointing as Consul-General a very well qualified career diplomat, who became the first Siamese national to assume the post. This position was deemed important by the King because of the extent of contact and intercourse, especially in commerce, between the two parties.⁶⁵ King Rama VII, like his father, visited Singapore on his way to Java. When the Foreign Ministry proposed to the Cabinet the appointment as Consul-General for Singapore of an official whose suitability

⁶⁴ Lim, *Through the Eyes of the King*, pp. 164-165.

⁶⁵ NAT Document (Mor Ror 6 Tor / 10). The first ever Consul-General of Siamese nationality was appointed by King Rama VI in 1922. His name was Phya Pradibadh Bhubal (Khaw Yoo Lae Na Ranong), a scion of the dynastic "clan" descended from the famous Khaw Soo Cheang of Penang and southern Siam. Born in Penang, educated in England and called to the Bar (becoming just the second Thai to qualify as a Barrister-at-Law), he joined the Siamese Diplomatic Service. Granted the title of Luang Sunthorn Kosa, he was included in King Chulalongkorn's official suite for the King's first visit to Europe in 1897. Phya Pradibadh was a true polyglot, speaking Thai, English, Malay and Chinese. His appointment as Consul-General was not only for Singapore, but also Penang, the Federation of Malaya and the Borneo Islands. King Rama VI visited Singapore and Malaya while Phya Pradibadh was Consul-General.

seemed to be in doubt to some Cabinet members, the King went on record, remarking that the post of Consul-General in Singapore was of special importance, and more so than even India and that, therefore, the Foreign Minister should be discreetly approached to see whether there could not be a better alternative candidate.⁶⁶

The watershed political change in 1932 resulted in a revolutionary break with the past, as Siam entered a long period of internal instability. Leading figures of the “ancien regime” had to seek refuge abroad, to be joined later by political exiles and refugees, victims of the ongoing tussle within the new ruling elite. In such circumstances, Singapore, along with Penang, provided a reliable safe haven.⁶⁷ King Rama VII’s abdication in 1934 resulted in the ascension to the throne of his nine year-old nephew, King Ananda Mahidol, or King Rama VIII, then living in Switzerland. In 1938, the young King stopped over in Singapore with his family en route to Siam. The King’s stay in Singapore was well reported, and relayed to the Bangkok media to the delight of the King’s subjects. Meanwhile, normal intercourse continued between Siam and Singapore, with emphasis again on expanding commerce. Singapore, by then, had increasingly become the centre of British power and administration in Southeast Asia. From the standpoint of international politics, Singapore stood out once more as an ideal listening post for any information gleaned from the Western Powers or Japan. Throughout the Second World War, records of communications between the Siamese Consulate in Singapore and Bangkok are replete with “listening post” reports,⁶⁸ including the movements of Siamese political exiles.

Finally, after the hiatus of the war years, Singapore found its way into another page of Thai history in 1945 when, as the revived post-war headquarters of the British regional administration, it was the venue for the negotiation and conclusion of the formal Anglo-Thai Peace Treaty, whereby peace was formally restored between the two Kingdoms, with Siam making war reparations to Britain in the form of the provision of rice shipments to Malaya.⁶⁹ Not long after that quirk in history, Siam became Thailand in 1949 while Singapore became fully independent just fifty years ago, on 9 August 1965. Relations between Thailand and Singapore, however, continued to be cordial, as the two nations joined together as founding members of ASEAN, the progenitor of the nascent ASEAN Community.

⁶⁶ NAT Document (Mor Ror 7 Tor / 6).

⁶⁷ Prince Purachatr of Kampaeng Petch, a son of King Chulalongkorn and influential Minister of Communications under King Rama VII, went to live in exile in Singapore immediately after the coup in 1932, and passed away there. Singapore became the refuge for a few senior Siamese officials of the old regime, who fled political persecution or escaped from prison on Tarutao Island, such as Phya Sarabhai Pipat, a noted ex-naval officer turned journalist and author, who spent the pre-war years there working as translator for the British authorities before moving to Australia.

⁶⁸ NAT Document (2.SorRor 0201.86).

⁶⁹ Direk Jayanama, *Thailand and World War II* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2008), pp. 215-226.