

# Bangkok Modern: Singapore and Batavia as Models<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Under an emergence of the new world order by the nineteenth century, the world was dominated by the Western world economy and Imperialism. With an increasing demand and high competition, Southeast Asia was forced either by military force or diplomatic strategy to be under European occupation. In the case of Siam, the government under King Mongkut and King Chulalongkorn was able to change this threat to become ‘a great chance’. Because of closer commercial relations and for political reasons, Singapore and Batavia became models for transforming Bangkok at the earlier period of modernization. To fit ‘an international standard’, both kings adopted a form of modernity from Singapore and Batavia to transform Bangkok to be similar to a European-like city. The transformation not only had an impact on the physical change to a new form, but people were able to conform to a modern standard of living as well. ‘Bangkok Modern’, during that time, followed a standard of *beauty-hygiene-order*, with a similar standard as European-like cities such as Singapore and Batavia.

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This article examines how Bangkok was initially reconstructed with the concept of a modern city. In particular, after visiting Singapore and Java (Batavia and Semarang) in 1871, King Chulalongkorn adopted a form of 'modernity' from both colonial cities to transform Bangkok during the earlier years of his reign.

## Introduction

By the mid-nineteenth century, European activities in the Orient were partly in response to revolutionary changes in industry and communication. New demands for raw material and markets were notable in many industrial countries in Europe. European countries actively expanded their trading activities into the rest of the world, especially the Far East. In addition, the establishment of faster routes of communication with the East linked European ports directly with Asian markets.

Because of its good strategic location, European powers established their standpoints in Southeast Asia to access Chinese trade. For example, the Dutch and British occupied Batavia in Java and Singapore, respectively. To access potential markets and profitable resources, European countries expanded their interests with commercial treaties and military intervention. Moreover, the Europeans claimed a discipline of liberal trade and the moral responsibility of Christianity to dominate the region.

In the case of Siam, from the time the new capital of Bangkok was founded in 1782, European countries, especially the British, attempted to expand trade activities in Siam following their own terms. The British government at Calcutta sent diplomatic envoys to Siam several times to negotiate a commercial agreement with a free trade model in mind. Yet, their attempt did not succeed until King Mongkut came to the throne in 1851. From the time the Bowring Treaty was signed, Bangkok gradually changed from a military moat-fortified city to a commercial city following the West.

Under the pressure of economic change and the risk of political instability, and in order to be able to compete in the new world order of the nineteenth century, Bangkok could not sustain without change. Bangkok had to change her form and function to fit a 'new international standard' dominated by Western ways. Accordingly, a project of modernization under the reigns of King Mongkut (1851-1868) and King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910) was initiated by duplicating a form of modernity, using Singapore and Batavia as models.

### Under the Winds of 'Westernization'

The growth of Bangkok in the second half of the nineteenth century paralleled that of other colonial port cities in the region, including Batavia and Singapore, since it reflected the expansion of the world economy as much as the dynasty's designs. The liberalization of trade under the terms of the Bowring Treaty in 1855 afforded an opportunity for the development of the national economy of Siam by opening the door for a market economy on the grounds of the treaty in the following period. For Bangkok itself, the character of the city was changed to support foreign trade. Noticeably, by the mid-nineteenth century, Bangkok gradually transformed following a standard of Western modernization.

Tracing back to the first half of the nineteenth century, the coming of 'modernization' challenged political stability, economic benefit and traditional values. Yet, after King Mongkut came to the throne, this threat was gradually changed to be an opportunity. King Mongkut recognized and accepted that Siam at his time was '*half civilized-half barbarian*', and needed to change those '*half barbarian*' to fit with an '*international*' standard of civilization.<sup>3</sup> That is why the modernization projects in the cultural and intellectual realms were first launched in Bangkok through the outward-looking lens to the West.<sup>4</sup>

Regarding King Mongkut, because of his ability in English and his interest in Western knowledge, he became known as a modern

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<sup>3</sup> Charnvit, *Siam/Civilization-Thailand/Globalization*, 5-6.

<sup>4</sup> Pattana, *Farang as Siamese Occidentalism*, 22.

king among the Westerners, both inside and outside Siam.<sup>5</sup> An article published in *The Straits Times* dated 8 July 1851 described his ability in modern sciences:

...while in the priesthood he made himself somewhat popular abroad by his free intercourse with foreigners, his creditable progress in the English language, and his attention to some of the modern sciences...he adopted the Copernican system of astronomy to introduce the true sciences and improvement, and as a consequence throw off some of the superstitions of Buddhism.<sup>6</sup>

In his generation, there were a number of royal elite and nobleman interested in Western knowledge, such as navigation, engineering and medical sciences. Mastering the English language, they could closely follow the situation in Asia and neighboring countries; for example, the “Opium War” in China and the expansion of the European powers in the region. This helped them to consider the real power of the West as it ought to be.<sup>7</sup> According to the Europeans, this young group would be the new hope for those who desired to extend their trade activities into Siam. In particular, the ascendance of Prince Mongkut was in the attention and expectation of the foreigners in Bangkok and Singapore.<sup>8</sup>

Soon after ascending the throne, King Mongkut urgently reestablished diplomatic relations by signing treaties with the Western countries during the 1850s and 1860s. The most important result of these treaties was that Western traders could freely operate their trade in Siam without any conditions. Furthermore, according to the diplomatic terms, Western consuls, Westerners and their subjects increasingly came to dwell in Bangkok.

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<sup>5</sup> During his priesthood, Prince Mongkut applied his knowledge of English to extend his knowledge into modern sciences, history, geography, mathematics, and especially astronomy, which was his favorite subject. In Waugh, *Bangkok: The Story of a City*, 49.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Siam’, *The Straits Times*, 5.

<sup>7</sup> Steinberg, *In Search of Southeast Asia*, 117.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Siam’, *The Straits Times*, 5.

With an increase in the number of Westerners, King Mongkut allotted an area along the Chao Phraya River to the southward for the Western consuls and the Westerners, later becoming known the 'European district' in Bangkok. Even though they were not a majority of dwellers in Bangkok,<sup>9</sup> their influential requests enable Bangkok to improve following the West, particularly road construction. Dr. Bradley advised King Mongkut that the most important conditions for becoming a civilized nation were the construction of better roads (1866) and conversion to Christianity (1849). Regarding this opinion, King Mongkut agreed that if Siam wanted to be '*a truly civilized nation*', construction of a road network and scientific progress must be considered. However, he excluded Christianity reasoning that Siam had Buddhism as a system of morality and civility.<sup>10</sup> Although King Mongkut recognized the need to adopt '*Western modernity*' to improve Siam, he chose to adopt a part that could adjust to the Thai ways.

Because of his scientific skills, King Mongkut appreciated the need to gain empirical experience by travelling to different places. These experiences were very useful for his further administration. Regarding modernizing Siam (Bangkok), the king recognized the need to observe a European city as well. Yet, unfortunately for him, he never had the chance to visit a foreign land in person. Traditionally, going abroad had been impossible for him and the royal family because of ancient customs. However, to increase the capacity to compete in the world standardized with Western ways, the king wanted to transform Siam, centered at Bangkok, similar to a European-like city.

The possible nearby European-like cities were Singapore and Batavia. For King Mongkut, Singapore was more possible. Singapore had been a trade partner of Siam since her establishment. So, when Singapore developed to be a hub of commerce linking markets between Asia and Europe, Siam was integrated with the Western world economy through trading with Singapore. Furthermore, Singapore in the mid-nineteenth century was a beautiful and modern European

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<sup>9</sup> According to a census of 1882, the European inhabitants in Bangkok were approximately 300. In Sternstein, *Portrait of Bangkok*, 77-78.

<sup>10</sup> Pramoj, *A King of Siam Speaks*, 16.

colony model of the British with Victorian architecture, progressive technology, and a modern social life. Not surprisingly, King Mongkut chose Singapore to be a learning centre of Western modernity. In 1861, the king sent Chao Phraya Srisuriyawong (Chuang Bunnag) to observe the administrative system in Singapore. After his return, some ideas for creating a modern city were adopted in Bangkok. For example, road construction with a row of shop-houses was initiated under the reign of King Mongkut. Even the king had a deep desire to visit Singapore in person. Unfortunately, he died after coming back from an observation of a solar eclipse at Wah Ko in 1868.

In the following reign, Singapore remained under consideration of the Siamese government as a place for learning ‘*Western modernization*’. The Dutch city of Batavia also became a model for transforming Bangkok. Soon after King Chulalongkorn came to the throne, he arranged to visit Singapore and Java in 1871. From that trip, King Chulalongkorn brought a form of modernity from Singapore-Batavia to transform the physical landscape and to improve the standard of living in Bangkok.

### ‘A Study Tour’: A European-like City

‘A study tour’ was initiated by King Mongkut when he sent his high ranking official to observe the administrative system in Singapore. This learning method became a favorite in the following reign. King Chulalongkorn was known as ‘The King Who Opened the World of Traveling’<sup>11</sup> because he was the first Siamese King who made long-distance, overseas journeys, both to Asia and Europe. In particular, he adopted and adapted what he had seen to develop Siam. However, the two overseas journeys, the Grand Visit Tours to Europe in 1897 and 1907, are usually mentioned as the most important overseas journeys in Siamese history. It has been argued that both tours brought Siam into the modern world by pursuing policies of ‘*blending with the wind*’. However, Charnvit Kasetsiri argues that this interpretation of King Chulalongkorn’s reign is misleading because it puts too much

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<sup>11</sup> Sahai, *India in 1872*, 5.

emphasis on the two European trips for adaptation of Western ways to Siam. In fact, the royal trips in Asia during the earlier years of



The portrait of the 17-year-old King Chulalongkorn produced when he visited Singapore and Java in 1871. (Photo courtesy of The National Archives of Thailand.)



King Chulalongkorn in the Western dress in a photograph taken at Robert Lenz Studio in Singapore in 1896, one year before visiting Europe. (Photo courtesy of The National Archives of Thailand.)

his reign were much more important, and had a significant influence on the king's administrative reforms and the larger modernization of Siam. During the visit to the colonial cities in Asia, the progress of Singapore and Java, as well as India,<sup>12</sup> impressed the young king so much that he adopted a form of modernity from Singapore and Batavia to improve Bangkok. As well, the administrative system in British India was noted by the king. It could be said that the administration of the colonial governments had more influence on his early reforms, not the states in Europe.

<sup>12</sup> Huen, *Through the Eyes of the King*, 27.

During the early years of his reign, King Chulalongkorn visited several colonial cities in Asia in person. Singapore and Java (Batavia and Semarang) were the two first destinations for the 17 year-old king. Afterwards, King Chulalongkorn made official trips to Singapore (the British) and Java (the Dutch) two more times, in 1896 and 1901.

On the royal trips to Singapore and Java, King Chulalongkorn travelled for various reasons: a study tour and travelling for pleasure. The first trip was to study the administrative system in the British and Dutch colonies. The second Singapore-Java trip in 1896<sup>13</sup> and the third trip in 1901, were mainly for the personal pleasure of His Majesty and to recover his health.<sup>14</sup> Thus, to explain the importance of the royal overseas journey for improving Siam, it will be helpful to focus on the first Singapore-Java trip.

His first trip in 1871 was planned by the Regent or Somdej Chao Phraya Srisuriyawong (Chuang Bunnag) who felt that the king should observe the British and Dutch systems of administration. The obvious purpose of this trip was to give him the opportunity to study European statesmanship to help prepare the king to rule.<sup>15</sup> An editorial in the *Singapore Free Press* of 22 May 1896 commented that the king had seen everything of interest there was to see.<sup>16</sup> Another purpose for visiting Singapore was to increase commercial relations between Singapore and Siam. In a speech of King Chulalongkorn that replied to Thomas Scott, Chairman of the Singapore Chamber of Commerce, he stated:

Commerce is one of the chief sources of the wealth of nations. It stimulates industry and promotes the welfare and prosperity of various classes. Our Revered Father during his reign sought treaties of friendship and alliance with European governments to increase commercial relations between the respective peoples. It will be our endeavor to follow in his

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<sup>13</sup> The following year, King Chulalongkorn went on the First Grand Trip in Europe. It could be possible that the king visited Singapore and Java in 1896 to prepare for the Grand Trip in Europe.

<sup>14</sup> Suharto, *Journeys to Java by a Siamese King*, 15-16.

<sup>15</sup> Terwiel, *A History of Modern Thailand, 1767-1942*, 217, cited in Huen, xv.

<sup>16</sup> Huen, "In the Footsteps of the King", 247.



footsteps, and to increase by every means in our power, the prosperity which had attended the policy thus initiated.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, the *Strait Times Overland Journal* in Singapore commented that the trip would benefit the king, particularly commercial relations, stating:

...this being the first time a King of Siam has ever visited a foreign country, there is very reason to hope that his trip to Singapore and Java will not only prove of great benefit to himself and his people, but also lead to an extension of trade and closer commercial relations between his kingdom and dependencies and the civilized nations....<sup>18</sup>

Siam and Singapore had had closer commercial relations since the 1820s. With a long term commercial relationship, the Siamese government was familiar with Singapore more than other colonial Asian countries. Thus, not surprisingly, the government chose Singapore as a model for modernizing Bangkok.

On 9 March 1871, the young king departed from Bangkok on the steam yacht *Regent*. The royal party consisted of sixty-five persons, including his brothers, the Minister of War and the Minister for Foreign Affairs. The party included an artist, a photographer, doctors, pages, bodyguards, scribes and cooks. The *Regent* arrived in Singapore at Johnston's Pier on 15 March.<sup>19</sup> During his time in Singapore,<sup>20</sup> the king met a number of prominent persons of Singapore, including government officials and merchants. Furthermore, he went sightseeing to many places in Singapore, for example, government buildings (the Government House, Town Hall, the barracks), public services (the Post Office, a church, the Raffles Institution, a hospital, an asylum, a jail) and city life (local markets, Chinese communities, the botanical

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<sup>17</sup> Huen, *Through the Eyes of the King*, 10.

<sup>18</sup> *Straits Times Overland Journal*, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Suharto, *Journeys to Java by a Siamese King*, 3-5.

<sup>20</sup> Prior to visiting Singapore in 1871, Singapore had become a Crown Colony in 1867. Its rule officially transferred to the Colonial Office in London, along with Malacca and Penang which altogether formed the Straits Settlements. In Liu, *Singapore: A pictorial history 1819-2000*, 97.

gardens, shops at Raffles Place).<sup>21</sup> For the second Singapore-Java Tour, the king visited newly established organizations in Singapore, including banks, law courts, waterworks, and a fire station. King Chulalongkorn also inspected a tin-smelter and land reclamation works when he visited Singapore in 1896.

One of the places that impressed the king was Raffles Institution because he had his own plans for educational reform. This school was founded by Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles with his strong inspiration “to be a means of civilizing and bettering the conditions of millions.”<sup>22</sup> Soon after returning, the king sent fourteen Siamese boys to study at this school. However, they studied there for only a short time because they were called back Siam the following year to study at the English school established by the king. Furthermore, the king brought some ideas seen at Tanglin Barracks, a military barrack.<sup>23</sup> After his return, he ordered construction of a row of two-storey building as a residence of his own personal troops within the Grand Palace compound, the model being duplicated from Singapore.<sup>24</sup>

After a week in Singapore, the king departed for Java of the Dutch. He visited mainly Batavia where the government buildings, commercial zone, and European district were situated. As in Singapore, the king visited military barracks, schools, hospitals, jails, a museum, the custom house and railways (in Semarang). Soon after the king returned to Bangkok, the idea of establishing The Royal Auditing Office and museum were adopted to reform the financial system and show a modern pattern of social life, respectively.

The king also went to Koningsplein (the field of kings), which was surrounding by European residences, government buildings and

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<sup>21</sup> Suharto, *Journeys to Java by a Siamese King*, 6-7.

<sup>22</sup> Huen, *Through the Eyes of the King*, 15.

<sup>23</sup> Tanglin Barracks was built on the site of an old nutmeg plantation and troops had been garrisoned there since about 1868. King Chulalongkorn visited in 1871, four years after the Straits Settlements were transferred from the East India Company to the Colonial Office. The Singapore garrison became part of the bulwark of British garrisons defending Britain’s far-flung empire. In Huen, *Through the Eyes of the King*, 12.

<sup>24</sup> Yet, after this building was constructed completely, it was used for being an office of the Royal Auditing Office (หอรับฎากรณพิพัฒน์) instead.

clubs.<sup>25</sup> This area was called ‘Weltevreden’, a European district in Batavia. Here, by the nineteenth century, Europeans adopted the colonial empire style: uniformly white-painted, simple single-storey buildings with colonnaded galleries. In Koningsplein, the Europeans lived in a relaxed fashion in airy rooms overlooking potted plants, palms, sweet-smelling frangipani and massive tamarind, kenari and other tropical trees.<sup>26</sup> At the north of Koningsplein could be found the oldest and most famous of the clubs around which European social life revolved – the Harmonie Club, a civilian social club. Another club for governmental officials was the Concordia Club, an officer’s club.<sup>27</sup>

The first time that King Chulalongkorn visited Batavia, he also attended a reception at the town hall and fancy-dress balls held at the Harmonie and Concordia Clubs. As he had done in Singapore, the king went sightseeing to many places presenting ‘*a standard of civilization*’; for example, in Batavia, he went to the Supreme Court, a machinery workshop, the Custom House, a drawbridge, some shops, a church, the zoo, a museum; and in Semarang, a gunpowder factory, a hospital, an asylum, a home industry, a missionary school for girls, some train stations.<sup>28</sup> Again, after his returning, the king established some of these places within the Grand Palace compound; for example, a military club similar to the Concordia Club.

King Chulalongkorn adopted many ideas from what he had seen in Batavia to adjust the environment in Bangkok. According to the layouts of both cities, Bangkok and Batavia were similar canal-cities. As Pensupha has pointed out, Bangkok was similar to Batavia-Amsterdam because they both had a network of canals and small crossing-bridges. As further proof of this argument, according to Thai historical documents that illustrate the New Siam era under

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<sup>25</sup> Suharto, *Journeys to Java by a Siamese King*, 9-13.

<sup>26</sup> Tamarinds were planted surrounding Sanam Luang (the Royal Field), similar to Koningsplein, when King Chulalongkorn ordered this field to be renovate from a square shape to become an oval shape and adjusted the environmental landscape around the royal palace compound after the Front Palace Crisis ended.

<sup>27</sup> Most visitors to Batavia or Weltevreden by the nineteenth century commented that this city was ‘a beautiful city’, ‘Queen of the East’, and was ‘spacious, airy and elegant’. In Abeyasekere, *Jakarta a History*, 54-55.

<sup>28</sup> Suharto, *Journeys to Java by a Siamese King*, 10-11.

King Chulalongkorn, the king hired Dutch engineers to work as governmental advisors to devise a city plan; in particular, to construct a canal system and crossing bridges in Bangkok.<sup>29</sup>

The places that the king observed during his trips in Singapore and Batavia were models for developing and improving Bangkok to become closer to a civilized city, including the administration, customs and landscape. The king adjusted the landscape of Bangkok during the early part of his reign, prior to the First Grand Visit Europe. The king considered his first trip as an important strategy for improving Siam. In 1874, King Chulalongkorn proclaimed the establishment of the Council of State and the Privy Council. In his speech, he mentioned "... travelling across the sea to visit foreign lands, to observe the customs of more advanced nations, and to select those practices which might prove of value and use to Siam."<sup>30</sup>

Table 1 shows the places that King Chulalongkorn had seen in Singapore and Batavia, and, after his return, the new buildings and modern sites in Bangkok that were constructed under his command.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Pensupa, *Seen the Past through Housing*, 41.

<sup>30</sup> Engel, *Law and Kingship*, 33, cited in Huen, *Through the Eyes of the King*, xiv-xv.

<sup>31</sup> H.R.H. Damrong Rachanubhap, *Recollections in 5 Parts*, 258-263.

**Table 1:**

Ideas that King Chulalongkorn adopted from Singapore and Batavia in 1871

Singapore	Batavia	Bangkok
<b>Botanic Garden</b>	Botanic Garden (Bogor)	The royal botanic garden 'Saranrom Garden'
<b>Tanglin Barrack</b>	(a military barracks)	A row of residential buildings for the royal guardsman
	Museums in Batavia	Museum
	The Custom House	The Royal Auditing Office (หอรัษฎากรพิพัฒน์)
<b>The Singapore Club</b>	Concordia Club	Concordia Building (ศาลาสหทัยสมาคม)
<b>Padang</b>	Koningsplein	Renovating Sanam Luang into an oval shape circled with tamarind trees
	Drawbridge/the brick carriage roads parallel to the canal	'Vilanda' drawbridge/Rajini and Aussadang roads parallel to Ku Muang Derm
<b>Raffles Place</b>	Shops/stores	Renovating shop-houses in Singapore and Batavia designs
<b>Prisons</b>		A new prison situated on Mahachai Road <sup>32</sup>

After his returned from the Singapore – Java Tour, the young king was very impressed with that trip so he wanted to go to Europe. However, the regent felt that Europe was too far for that time and India became an alternative. The young king left for India in 1872.<sup>33</sup> The program of the tour in India seems to have been mainly a study

<sup>32</sup> King Chulalongkorn initiated reform of the administrative system of the prison around 20 years later after the king had visited a prison during the first visit to Singapore-Java in 1871. However, other public organizations were established soon after the king returned from the trip to India.

<sup>33</sup> Huen, *Through the Eyes of the King*, xv.

of Indian history and civilization.<sup>34</sup> Not only archeological sites of ancient kingdoms and other historical and religious sites, but, more importantly, the king learned about the places and events of uprisings during the Sepoy Mutiny that occurred in 1857. However, the results of this ‘study tour’ were practical toward his political strategy. By meeting with the former Indian rulers, the king understood the process of constructing imperial Britain there and analyzed the failure of the administration which caused the British, or other colonizers, to interfere in the state affairs of Indian kingdoms.<sup>35</sup> This became an important lesson that King Chulalongkorn learned from his experiences in India.<sup>36</sup>

Soon after returning from India, the king intended to improve the administrative system in Siam immediately. However, the old powers, a group of bureaucratic officials and the regent, aggressively resisted his reforms such that it became a political crisis, known as ‘The Crisis of Front Palace (1874-1875)’. After this crisis ended, the king recognized that his hurried reforms created a risk of internal political stability and a chance for interference by the colonizers. Therefore, the king had to delay his ‘Reform Project’ and await new change to come.<sup>37</sup> He was forced to ‘go slow’ for some years and, to release the pressure of the political crisis, King Chulalongkorn made the decision to adopt a form of modernity from Singapore and Batavia to modernize Bangkok during the first half of his reign. The chance would come at the end of the 1880s when the regent and the prince of the Front Palace passed away in 1883 and 1885, respectively. The king and his government were in full control of the country, with the peak of the campaign for centralizing administrative reforms coming in 1892. From this, it should be noted that the peak was passed well before the First Grand Tours to Europe in 1897.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Paladisai, *King Rama V and Siam's Reformation*, 61.

<sup>35</sup> These weak points consist of an internal political conflict, a lack of good administration and an ignorance of ‘advance and improvement’.

<sup>36</sup> Sahai, *India in 1872*, 311-312.

<sup>37</sup> *The Royal Letter of His Majesty King Chulalongkorn for Sir Andrew Clark*, (27 November 1876), cited in Sahai, *India in 1872*, 306.

<sup>38</sup> Huen, *Through the Eyes of the King*, xi.

## Bangkok Modern: City of Beauty-Hygiene-Order

To enable Siam to stand as equal with the West, King Mongkut had attempted to improve Bangkok soon after ascending the throne to become ‘*a truly civilized city*’ similar to a European city. In particular, the king adopted modernity from Singapore. Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles strongly intended to build Singapore to become a city of hygiene, safety and convenience. This concept became the model for an ‘Oriental City’ in Southeast Asia, including Siam. Not surprisingly, the Siamese government under King Mongkut chose to follow the tracks of Singapore. The king began by hiring a Dutch engineer from Singapore to survey the physical landscape in Bangkok in order to produce a map of Bangkok, as reported by Dr. Bradley in his newspaper, *Bangkok Recorder*.<sup>39</sup> The purpose of this was to rearrange the land use in order to beautify the city. At the beginning of modernizing Bangkok, King Mongkut transformed Bangkok using the standards of a modern city similar to Singapore: *beauty-hygiene-order*.

The need to beautify Bangkok was the first thing to consider, especially its physical landscape. Thus, constructing roads and buildings partly modified Bangkok at that time. As King Mongkut explained the reason to construct new roads to improve and beautify Bangkok:

Every year the Europeans increasingly come to Bangkok. Their countries have smooth and clean roads, while here there are dirty alleys and muddy roads. It is very shameful when the Europeans see these roads. So, it is a good thing that these Europeans advise us to improve our city to be more beautiful.<sup>40</sup>

King Mongkut started to transform Bangkok gradually from water to land. Because of the request of the Westerners to construct a carriage road, the king commanded Chao Phraya Srisuriyawong to construct Charoen Krung Road (New Road) with a row of one-storey

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<sup>39</sup> Bradley, “A Dutch Engineer”, 513.

<sup>40</sup> *Collected Chronicles of King Rama IV*, vol. 14, part 22-25, 292-293.

shop-houses.<sup>41</sup> This road went direct toward the southward from the Grand Palace to the south, the end of the road being Bang Kolem,<sup>42</sup> connecting the new commercial zone (Charoen Krung-Bamrourng Muang-Pheang Nakorn), the Chinese commercial zone (Sampheang), and the new residential area of Europeans.

In addition, King Mongkut built forty two-storey building situated on Sanam Chai Road near the Grand Palace compound. These buildings were used primarily for housing foreign teachers and officers. Later, the king built four more buildings at the front of the Throne Hall of Sutthaisawan, situated at the eastern side of the palace walls. These buildings were used as a dormitory for Western military training troops. It could be said that the first image of 'beautiful' Bangkok emerged around the Grand Palace compound. This image was partly inspired by the experiences of Chao Phraya Srisuriyawong seeing Singapore in 1861.<sup>43</sup>

Soon after returning from Singapore and Java in 1871, King Chulalongkorn commanded to be built governmental buildings with architecture and interior design that was inspired by what he had seen in the colonial cities. For example, the king renovated the Throne Hall of Phaisantaksin with a Western design. Furthermore, the king adopted Western fashion dress and dining in the Western custom to the royal court.<sup>44</sup> It could be said that the Western customs became a royal value and a fashionable trend in the royal court under his reign.

To transform Bangkok with 'beautification', an area within the city walls was renovated with an appearance similar to Batavia. For example, the king constructed roads circling a line of the city walls. Also, the muddy watersides of the Ku Muang Derm, from Chang Rongsi Bridge to the mouth of Talad (market) Canal, were made more beautiful with brick dams and a crossing

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<sup>41</sup> During the reign of King Mongkut, shop-houses were built along inner Charoen Krung Road from Wat Po to Triangle sections at 'the upper Iron Bridge' and along Bamrung Muang-Phueng Nakon Roads. These shop-houses were duplicated from Singapore. Nowadays, some of them remain along Tanao Road.

<sup>42</sup> Thongtor, *225 Years of Rattanakosin*, 156.

<sup>43</sup> Nangnoi, *Architecture Heritage of Rattanakosin*, 217.

<sup>44</sup> Wattana, *Architecture During the Reign of King Chulalongkorn*, 37-38.





(Left): Shop-houses in Ta Tian. (Photo by the author, 2011).  
 (Right): Shop-houses in Singapore situated on Dunlop Street.  
 (Photo by the author, 2009).

drawbridge, called ‘Vilanda Bridge’, as seen in Batavia.<sup>45</sup> Along both sides of this canal paralleled two new roads, Aussadang and Rajini Roads. The king also adopted a ‘value of beauty’ of a botanical garden that he had seen at the Agri-Horticultural Gardens<sup>46</sup> and botanical garden of Whampoa<sup>47</sup> in Singapore to arrange a botanical garden in the Saranrom Palace for the royal pleasure and later open for the public.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> In Batavia, the canal was dammed in the early 1830s in order to prevent silt and mud flowing into it from the Ciliwung River thereby making it too shallow to use. In Merrillees, *Batavia in Nineteenth Century Photographs*, 26.

<sup>46</sup> Now it is known as the Botanic Gardens.

<sup>47</sup> Hoo Ah Kay or Whampoa came to Singapore in 1830 at the age of fifteen. His knowledge of English gave him a distinct advantage and he built up a successful business as ship’chandler and as supplier to Her Majesty’s Navy. He diversified into other business and had a bakery, a department store, and an ice-house by the Singapore River. During the trip of 1871, King Chulalongkorn visited his mansion in Sarangoon Road which was noted for its splendid ornamental garden. In Huen, *Through the Eyes of the King*, 20.

<sup>48</sup> The Saranrom Palace was founded under the royal command of King Mongkut. Initially, the king intended to live there after his retirement; unexpectedly, he died soon after returning from Wah Ko. Later, King Chulalongkorn duplicated the idea for a botanical garden he had seen in Singapore to arrange a botanical garden in Bangkok. This garden is situated between Charoen Krung Road and Rajini Road.

To modify Bangkok with ‘beautification’ during the reign of King Chulalongkorn, the city was transformed distinctly by extending roads and building colonial buildings along the roads. In particular, ‘Rattanakosin Island’, was adjusted with a physical landscape for ‘beauty and order’. The government specified the pattern of building, in particular, shop-houses with a five-footway along the Singapore model. An announcement by the Sanitation Department on behalf of the king stated that:

...if any person wants to construct a buildings on the public road (tanon luang)<sup>49</sup>which has no walkway, that person would be expected to build a building with providing a 5-foot-wide space at the front of that building for a water pipe and walkway purposes...<sup>50</sup>

‘Beauty and Order’ became the standard of a civilized city. To be a truly civilized nation, Siam needed to improve and modify Bangkok to fit this standard. Bangkok gradually transformed from ‘tradition and disorder’ to become a city of ‘beautification’ with a road network and brick buildings. However, beauty comes with hygiene in order to build a good environment for dwellers in the city, and Bangkok also had to improve the environment, not only for a comfortable livelihood, but to facilitate trading activity in the city as well.

Because of an epidemic of tropical diseases, particularly cholera in Bangkok,<sup>51</sup> the European inhabitants were seriously concerned about their health. They complained about dirty and polluted water because the people threw carcasses of dead animals into the rivers and canals where they floated up and down in great abomination. To improve the standard of living of dwellers in Bangkok, a ‘hygiene standard’ became of more concern to the government and King Mongkut issued

<sup>49</sup> At that time, the word ‘*luang*’ was used to identify anything that belonging to the king, but practically, it was similar to the meaning of ‘public’ in terms of the West.

<sup>50</sup> Department of Sanitation, “An Announcement of Extending the road by Department of Sanitation”.

<sup>51</sup> Dr. Samuel Reynold House had written about the cholera epidemic in 1849 that it partly resulted from the Siamese custom of throwing the carcass of animals into the river. Otherwise, they threw multitudes of corpses without ceremony. In Feltus, *Samuel Reynolds House of Siam*, 79.

proclamations to guide the people on how to keep their housing and community from an unhealthy condition; for example, there was a notification in 1856 on ‘*The Inelegant Practice of Throwing Dead Animals into the Waterway, the Construction of Fireplaces, and the Manipulation of Window Wedges*’. This might have been the first time case of ‘public concern’ regarding sanitation in Bangkok.

In the following reign, the health conditions were more seriously considered as National Policy under the reign of King Chulalongkorn. The king established the Department of Sanitation in 1897. This department was responsible for the health of the people and hygiene in Bangkok. King Chulalongkorn initially established a water supply to provide clean water for people in Bangkok in 1903, which was completed in 1914.<sup>52</sup> The king may have gotten the idea from the second journey in Singapore-Java of 1896. On that journey, King Chulalongkorn visited the waterworks at Thomson Road Reservoir.<sup>53</sup>

Not only sanitation, but the king considered the importance of Public Health. During his visit of Singapore-Java, King Chulalongkorn was interested in the administrative system of the hospitals in Singapore. For example, Tan Tock Seng Hospital was included in the schedule of 1871.<sup>54</sup> As a result of observing the work of Public Health in the British colony, the king intended to establish a hospital in Bangkok. However, this did not happen until an epidemic of cholera occurred in Bangkok in 1881. In 1888, Siriraj Hospital, the first hospital, was opened by the government. After the first hospital was launched; a number of hospitals and school for medical sciences were founded.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Sombat, *King Chulalongkorn the Great*, 236.

<sup>53</sup> It was undertaken in 1857 to convey water to town. In Singapore Municipality, *Water works: Opening of New Works*.

<sup>54</sup> Tan Tock Seng Hospital was founded in 1844 by Tan Tock Seng, Tan Kim Ching’s father. This hospital was established ‘for the sick of all nations’ run by the Chinese community. It was originally located at Pearl’s Hill, but at the time of the king’s visit, it had moved to Balestier Road. The hospital has been situated at Moulmein Road since 1909. Interestingly, during his 1890 visit, King Chulalongkorn donated \$1,000 to this hospital. In Huen, *Through the Eyes of the King*, 5.

<sup>55</sup> The following year, a school of medical sciences was established. Initially, the curriculum included Western medical sciences and traditional medical healing. Later, the medical school became a place for teaching Western knowledge of medical sciences systematically and academically. In Jarun, *Medical History in Rattanakosin Period*, 42-46.

On the one hand, '*beautification*' with roads and colonial buildings was necessary for making a modern Bangkok; on the other hand, '*hygiene*' became the new standard of urban livelihood, especially as a value of beautification in a modern city. During the reign of King Chulalongkorn, road and building construction became a new paradigm to solve the problem of the '*unhygienic*' environment in the city. If any canal was either unclean or unused, it was replaced with a road, for example, the case of the canal at Tek Me Kei in Sampheang.<sup>56</sup>

To effect '*beautification*' for Bangkok at that time, roads were constructed or renovated parallel to the canal for '*cleanliness*'. The Dutch government similarly constructed roads parallel to canals with crossing drawbridges in Batavia. Following his impression from the Batavia trip, the king beautified the environment of the inner section of Bangkok. Accordingly, not only '*beautification*', but '*cleanliness*' in the public area, along the roads and water ways, was recognized as improving the standard of civilization.

The last character of a modern city is '*order*'. Because of the growth of Bangkok, arranging order in the city was necessary to the security and comfort of the livelihood of the dwellers in the city. The arrangement of '*order*' needs to be considered in terms of public space and management.

The first public spaces organized by the government were recreation places. In this regard, a sense of '*public service*' was recognized initially during the reign of King Chulalongkorn. In particular, the king observed the administrative system and new organizations for modern social life during his visit to Singapore and Java. The king not only saw architecture, but also the pattern of Western social life. After his return, the king established 'modern organizations' to duplicate a form of modernity and as learning centres of Western culture and customs, specifically a museum, a club, and a botanical garden.

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<sup>56</sup> In this case, Chinese Cheng (March 1895) complained that the canal at Tek Me Kei in Sampheang was shallow because people always threw garbage into this canal and caused it to be dirty and smelly. So, to solve this problem, he asked permission from the government to construct a road over this canal. In The National Achieve of Thailand, King Rama V, the Ministry of Metropolis 8.1/70 box 2.

The second term of order is ‘*good management*’ to maintain a society in security and peace, standardized by a pattern of modernity, administrative systems and moral responsibility. With the dramatic growth of Bangkok, the problem of social security needed to be considered. To ensure that the dwellers in Bangkok had a measure of security, prisons and asylums were systematically reorganized. The king reformed the prison administration system and improved the standards of the prisons by observing a prison model in Singapore.<sup>57</sup>

In addition, the government considered the mental problem of the people by providing treatment for lunatics persons. The problem of lunatics had been addressed by the social treatment of King Mongkut. With a sense of moral responsibility, King Mongkut was concerned about solving this problem with good caring and good consciousness to the lunatics.<sup>58</sup> King Chulalongkorn had seen an asylum for lunatics when visiting Singapore-Batavia,<sup>59</sup> from which he got the idea which was adapted to Siam, and the first lunatic asylum was founded in Thonburi in 1889.

## Conclusion

Under the emergence of a new world order by the nineteenth century, the world was dominated by the Western world economy and Imperialism. With increasing demand and high competition, Southeast Asia was forced either by military forces or diplomatic strategy to be under European occupation. In the case of Siam, the government under King Mongkut and King Chulalongkorn changed this threat to be ‘a great chance’. Because of closer commercial relations and for political reason, Singapore and Batavia became models for

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<sup>57</sup> In 1871, King Chulalongkorn visited a prison in Singapore which had a progressive administration and a hygienic environment. Later when the king wanted to reform the prison administration system, he sent Phraya Indratipbodi Singharajrongmuang (Niem), a head of Krom Kong Traven, to observe the prison administration system at the Old Bailey Jail in Singapore in 1893. In Tepchoo, *Tracing Back to Bangkok in the Past*, 183-189.

<sup>58</sup> Charnvit, *Collected Proclamations of King Mongkut*, 220.

<sup>59</sup> Huen, *Through the Eyes of the King*, 14.

transforming Bangkok during the earlier period of modernization. To fit an ‘*international standard*’, both kings adopted a form of modernity from Singapore and Batavia to transform Bangkok to be similar to a European-like city. The transformation not only impacted the physical changes, but people were able to conform to a modern standard of living as well.

With the purpose of making a truly civilized city, the physical landscape of Bangkok was changed for the beautification of a modern city; a network of roads and colonial buildings along the roads were built. New businesses and services were established in Bangkok to respond to the growth of foreign trade and the extension of fashionable trends from the West. This included the idea of a modern city focused on the livelihood of the people in the city. Therefore, ‘*hygiene and order*’ were considered in order to improve the standard of civilization. Nowadays, Bangkok has further developed far from that beginning, but a trace of Singapore-Batavian influence remains as a historical heritage for memorializing the story of ‘Bangkok Modern’.

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