

Western Acculturation and the Transformation of Culinary Culture in the Court of King Rama V¹

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the background of Western culture adoption which assimilated and impacted on the transformation of the consuming custom and culinary culture among the Siamese elites in the reign of King Chulalongkorn.

The king and the royal leaders in that era, who centralized and initiated the transformation of the country, deeply understood Thai culture, as well as recognized the beneficial parts of Western culture by intelligently selecting the best and most suitable to blend Western culture with the old form of Thai tradition. The process of transforming the old tradition of Thai culinary culture to Western tradition did not alter the significant of authentic Thai. This allowed Thailand to be harmoniously transformed to be similar to a modernized country.

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Introduction

The studies of the influence and impact of Western culture on Thai society have involved various aspects. Thus, it would be quite complicated to analyze all aspects of the culture transformation in one research. This article aims to explore to what extent Western culture adoption by Thai society impacted the transformation of consuming tradition and culinary culture in the court of King Rama V (r. 1868-1910).

When considering the historical context of the country in this period, Thailand experienced a critical time threatened by imperialism upon the sovereignty of the country. The political pressure by the Western powers had significant impact on the king and the royal family's reaction in terms of determining the direction for the sovereignty of the country.³ The king unavoidably encountered a serious political situation and was concerned with the benefits of being modernized.

The reaction of the king and the royal family on the adoption of Westernization also led the country's reforms to modernize as a civilized nation. Significantly, Western culture prominently impacted the transformation of the culinary culture in the court of King Rama V, the evidence of which can be found within the royal palace and the consort's mansions. Indeed, this change affected the private and social lifestyle of the Siamese elites. Thus, modernization from the Western to Thai society occurred in this period

In the reign of King Rama V, Western culture became a symbol of modernization and was used as the norm in promoting the country's development. King Chulalongkorn's visits to other countries served not only to gain insight into the modernization of those civilized nations, but also as a symbol of his seeking acceptance from such powerful nations. It was an effort to elevate the country to that of Western countries. The reaction of the king and the royal family initially resulted in the necessity to learn and adopt Western culture that was first implemented in the royal court. Significantly, Western culture had an unanticipated impact on the reaction of the king, the

³ Vilailekha, *The Siamese Elite and the Western Culture Acculturation*, 89 (in Thai).

change of traditional concepts, the transformation of customs, and the consuming tradition in this era.

Notably, the significant reaction of the king and the royal family on the transformation of consuming traditions and culinary culture was related to two conditions: firstly, the Western powers which intimidated the sovereignty of the country; and secondly, the country's reforms to modernize. As a result, it was necessary for the king and the royal leaders, who centralized and initiated the transformation of the country, to learn and recognize the beneficial parts of Western culture by intelligently selecting the best and most suitable to blend with the old forms of Thai tradition.

A Brief Historical Background of Thai Culinary Culture

Since the old days up to the present, Thai society has always be open to other cultures and flexible in accepting alien cultures by blending them with the old forms of traditional Thai. Because Thailand is a place that comprises many people from different nations and cultures, the country has connected with foreigners with respect to international trade and diplomatic matters. This reason has led the capital city of Bangkok to be one of the most cosmopolitan places of the world regarding languages and cultural diversity. Thais have recognized and gradually absorbed alien food cultures into their ways of living, then harmoniously applied them to practice in their usual life.

When considering the historical context of the country before entering the period of King Rama V's reign, the prior kings had adopted other food cultures to practice within the court; for example, Portuguese food and desserts, Chinese food and cooking techniques, Indian curries, Western and Mon dishes.⁴ Interestingly, this happened without political pressure from the owners of these cultures. Thai kings in the prior time had freedom and flexible whether or not to adopt any culinary cultures to practice within the royal court. The foreign food cultures have also been applied to suit Thai society by blending them with the traditional Thai culinary culture. Therefore,

⁴ Wandee, *The Royal Favourite Dishes*, 11 (in Thai).

Thai cuisine is essentially a marriage of centuries-old Eastern and Western influences, harmoniously combined into something uniquely Thai.

Various kinds of foreign foods and desserts have been adopted and applied to use within the courts and mansions of the Siamese elites. The instances of Thai cuisine which are derived from other food cultures are as follows. The Thai style desserts adapted from the Portuguese who enjoyed the rich, egg-based desserts made of egg yolks and sugar syrup.

This popular family of desserts consists of “*thong* [ทอง] (gold)” in all of the names: *thong-yib* [ทองหยิบ] (pinched gold); *thong-yod* [ทองหยอด] (golden drops); and *foi-thong* [ฝอยทอง] (golden threads). These golden desserts are an ancient Thai dessert served for auspicious ceremonies. *Thong-yib*, *thong-yod*, *foi-thong* all mean to wish everyone with gold, much money and treasure, and to spend forever.

Another example is Thai style curries. Thais were very adaptable at foreign cooking methods and substituting ingredients. The ghee used in Indian cooking was replaced with coconut oil, and coconut milk substituted for other dairy products. This indicates that Thais have always been open to new things and flexible in applying the other cultures to blend to the old form of Thai traditions. When those other cultures or the new ideas were considered good and suitable for Thais, then they were adopted to practice within Thai society.

In the reign of King Rama III, very few Siamese elite attempted to understand Western manners and learn to be more civilized, for example, by changing from sitting on the floor to sitting on chairs, changing from placing food trays on a mat to placing food on the table, and changing from eating with the hands to using knives, spoons and forks instead.⁵ However, these new eating utensils and eating techniques had to be learned and practiced, thus royal banquets were held for Westerners who lived in Siam at that time.⁶

⁵ Chalee, *Three Meals of Traditional Thai Recipes*, 7 (in Thai).

⁶ Hall, *Dr. Reynold House*, 24-25.

In the reign of King Rama IV, the annual Kings' Birthday party was held in the palace in a Western style banquet with invited foreign guests who lived in Bangkok. The king did not eat at the same table, but walked around the guest dining tables talking to the guests individually.⁷ The tables at banquets of the Siamese elite were customarily separated by social rank which did not allow government officers and merchants to sit at the same table as the royal families and the king.

Apparently, the latter was the case at royal banquets in the reign of King Rama IV, where the king was at the central dining table and separate tables were organized by social rank. King Chulalongkorn stated in his book about King Rama IV that,

only invited royal members and the Siamese elite to have Thai dishes; Chinese foods and Western dishes both savory and desserts were serving on the table; everyone had a set of knife, spoon and fork, and chopsticks...⁸

Thus it can be assumed that the dining table had been set with different national cuisines, Thai, Chinese and Western food. Additionally, foreign dishes were not served in courses as is the Western style, but were served as a set of dishes which were eaten at the same time in the Thai style. Desserts and tea were only served after the meal.

The Transformation of the Culinary Culture in the Court Of King Rama V

King Chulalongkorn's long reign was the time when imperialism impacted Southeast Asia. Along with the expansion of imperialism in the mid-nineteenth century to all areas of the world, Asian countries, including Thailand, needed to adapt and learn to understand Western culture which represented modernization as a civilized country. In Southeast Asia, the old form of social life changed after Western rule

⁷ Mouhot, *Travels in Siam, Cambodia and Laos 1858-1860*, 214-215.

⁸ Rama V, *The Twelve Annual Ceremonies*, 221(in Thai).

arrived, resulting both in changes to the structural rule of the country and the people's sentiment.⁹

The impact of Western culture on Southeast Asia prominently occurred in 1869, the same era of King Rama V, when the Suez Canal was formerly opening to the world, which shortened the time to connect Europe and Asia and linked European products directly with Southeast Asian markets. Afterwards, Siam or Bangkok was commercially connected to the world market as the influx of Westernization on the Asian continent became widespread.

The influence of Western culture was led by the leader of the country and the Siamese elites who absorbed "civilized" culture by taking an interest in exotic products from Western countries. An ideal model of civilization was taken as the measurement for developing Thai society to be civilized after the Western fashion. Thai people's opinions of Westerners changed – they began to admire the new knowledge and technology from the West rather than disparage them.¹⁰ In the period of King Rama V, the way the upper classes lived in terms of consumption was driven by Western impulses. This period also saw more changes in social, political and economic structures and advances in both technology and education. Bangkok became an international centre because of its level of progress, facilities, well-developed communications and the growing infrastructure, the expansion of business, the growth in investment and the rise of the middle class.

The influence of Western culture played a vital role in Thai society of the elite. After Thailand had trade agreements with the West and reformed the country to modernize, the quantity of importing Western ingredients and food products substantial increased.¹¹ In this period, Western style eating was practiced within the court and the royal mansions only on formal occasions and royal ceremonies. This was one of the vital pieces of evidence indicating that King Chulalongkorn had reformed the country to be modern as a civilized nation. The transformation of culinary culture among Siamese elites in

⁹ Vilailekha, *The Siamese Elite and the Western Culture Acculturation*, 15-16 (in Thai).

¹⁰ Vilailekha, *The Siamese Elite and the Western Culture Acculturation*, 26-27 (in Thai).

¹¹ Vilailekha, *The Siamese Elite and the Western Culture Acculturation*, 108 (in Thai).

this era could have led the Westerners to realize that Thai people were civilized and educated. Those elites were encouraged to perceive various new things which sometimes affected their usual lifestyles.¹²

In order to become a civilized nation, Thailand needed to reform the country to be modernized like the West. The king and the royal family chose to adopt modern cuisine and culinary culture to practice in the court and mansions on the royal occasions so as to promote that Thailand had somehow been civilized. It can be seen that this attempt had been launched since the reign of King Chulalongkorn and was passed to the royal elites and continued to the lower level of Thai social classes of the next generations.



Figure 1:The Grand Visits to Europe of King Chulalongkorn¹³

¹² Sunun, “The Economical and Social Conditions in the Reign of King Rama V”, 18-20 (in Thai).

¹³ “ภาพจากสื่อต่างประเทศ เกี่ยวกับการเสด็จประพาสยุโรปของ ร. 5” 14 June 2556 <http://schau-thai.blogspot.com/2012/07/blog-post_4796.html>.

Perhaps, the visits to Europe by King Chulalongkorn and the royal family may have made the Western style eating tradition more clearly apparent in court society. After returning from these royal trips, there was an influx of Western customs into Siam, including royal court banquets. Thus, it can be said that the new age of culinary traditions began in the reign of King Rama V. Interestingly, the king's personal favor for Western food consumption significantly affected the royal family and court elites – the royal family started using dining tables and dining in the European manner and many of his children and courtiers were admitted to study in European colleges.¹⁴

Commerce with the Western countries made Siam's cultural change in various manners. One of those was “a banquet culture” or “Leang Toh” granting by the king within the royal court or royal mansions. The royal banquets were usually served for a purpose, such as a charitable gathering, a royal ceremony, or a celebration. This was established from European countries which Siamese elites tried to adopt into Thai culinary traditions. Banquets were also meant as a tool to build internal political relationships with foreigners.

Even though a new banquet culture was adopted, Siam did not adopt all aspects of Western culture. A painting of Thai ladies that appeared in the journey books to Siam of Henri Mouhot provides a picture of Siamese elites sitting on the floor eating food with their fingers instead of using spoons and forks, which clearly illustrated the image of Thai consuming culture in the past.¹⁵

The civilization from West to Thai society occurred long before 1868 which was the start of the reign of King Rama V, and had affected the knowledge and adaptation of the Siam's aristocracy. But, King Rama V learnt a different kind of Western culture and custom, one of which was eating culture and banquet culture. These banquet manners were recognized when King Rama V traveled to Singapore and Batavia. After visiting the two countries, the king expanded his eating manner, banquets, and royal court toilet. The king put a partition dividing the room at Paisantuksin throne hall to make three

¹⁴ Samountip, “A Study of Consuming Behavior Transformation of Thai People in Metropolitan Area During Period 1851-1991)”, 31 (in Thai).

¹⁵ Mouhot, *Travels in Siam, Cambodia and Laos 1858-1860*, 92.

rooms. At the west side, he put Western style furniture including a set of table and chairs and living room. At the center was a hallway, and at the east side, he changed the room to be a fully furnished Western style dining room with 20 seats.¹⁶



Figure 2:The Royal Court Banquet¹⁷

King Rama V also established new regulations for royal banquets, such as the way to please the royal guests with Western custom by wearing Western style formal dress. The king permitted courtiers and the royal families to join him at the dinner table, but they had to wear a white jacket with open collar as in Western style. One of the new regulations was for a royal table setting and serving. In 1888, the king's dining table was set in Thai traditional way to serve the king when having food with his hands. On the other hand, in 1898, the royal gazette "Court

¹⁶ Chaophraya Tevetwongsewivat, *The court rules and regulations for courtiers*, 41-43 (in Thai).

¹⁷ รัชสมัยหนังสือเก่า, "แม่ครัวหัวป่าก์ ต้นตำรับตำราแม่ครัวสยาม," 7 March 2556
<<http://www.bloggang.com/viewblog.php?id=lovesiamoldbook&date=10-10-2010&group=1&gblog=8>>.

ข้าราชการ”¹⁸ stated that the pages-in-waiting had set a royal table in different style banquet: Western food being served in luxury with a full set of tableware and utensils with Western style service, Chinese food was normally placed on left side of table, while Thai dishes were placed on the right side of table.



Figure 3:The King at Dining Table with His Royal Family at Private Time¹⁹

A full set of eating utensils in Western style was used for the first time in the reign of King Rama V in 1888.²⁰ The royal table banquet setting for the Western guests mostly provided utensils for savory dishes and desserts in the Western style.

¹⁸ Chaophraya Tevetwongsewiwat, *The court rules and regulations for courtiers*, 43 (in Thai).

¹⁹ Postjung, “เจ้าจอมเอิบ ผู้ถ่ายภาพในหลวงรัชกาลที่ 5 ทรงกับข้าว (ฉบับปรับปรุงใหม่),” 3 March 2556 <<http://board.postjung.com/638757.html>>.

²⁰ Kwankaew, *Evolution and Arts of Setting Table, Beverages, and Menu*, 40 (in Thai).

In the reign of King Rama V, the favorite dishes varied by type of cuisine, i.e., Thai and French. The most prominent favorite dishes that appeared on the royal table were these Thai dishes: *pla-ku-lao-song-kreung* [ปลากุเลาทรงเครื่อง], *ka-pi-kua* [กะปิควั], *gaeng-moo-tay-po* [แกงหมูเทโพ], and *pla-rah-lon* [ปลาร้าหลน]. For the French dishes: *beet root soup*, *roasted beef with pudding*, *chicken croquettes* and dessert was *caramel custard* with coffee.²¹

Also, the tradition of serving afternoon tea for honored guests at the royal palace or the palace of the aristocracies was normally accompanied with various kinds of snacks, such as cakes and the Thai crispy cake called '*kanom farang kudee chine*' [ขนมฝรั่งกุฎีจีน].²² Besides this, tea with sugar and milk was also served with cakes for foreigners.

Another exotic drink in the reign of King Rama V was coffee, for which various kinds of coffee beans were imported. Good quality coffee was served only in the foreign hotels located in Bangkok, such as the Oriental Hotel and Tokadero. Interestingly, a luxurious coffee shop called '*Norasigha*', serving the elite and the wealthy Chinese merchants, was established in 1922 located close to the equestrian stables of King Rama V. The tables were set with white cloth on the lawn, and a small car park provided for 3-4 cars.²³

At such a critical time, Siamese food culture evolved in accordance with political pressures. Food became a Siamese ploy to display their civilized culture to be equal to that of the influential Westerners. Western silverware was used on the dining table. The first Thai version of a cookbook was translated from English and French by King Chulalongkorn containing numerous recipes for Western dishes. He tried to follow many recipes using his wives as kitchen hands. Undoubtedly, the royal consorts could cook both superb Thai dishes and Western delicacies.²⁴

²¹ Wandee, *The Royal Favourite Dishes*, 17-70 (in Thai).

²² Suvicha, *In the Old Days*, 13, 15 (in Thai).

²³ Yod Watcharasatien, *Knowledge from the past*, 328 (in Thai).

²⁴ Poj Sajja, "Discovery of Chili Civilization, 28 (in Thai).

The first recipe book using standard measurements was written by Chao Phraya Bhasakaravansa's wife, Lady Plian. She mentioned that, "Siamese cooking is an art in itself, but it should be standardized so that the art can evolve into a science with a proper syllabus for posterity."²⁵

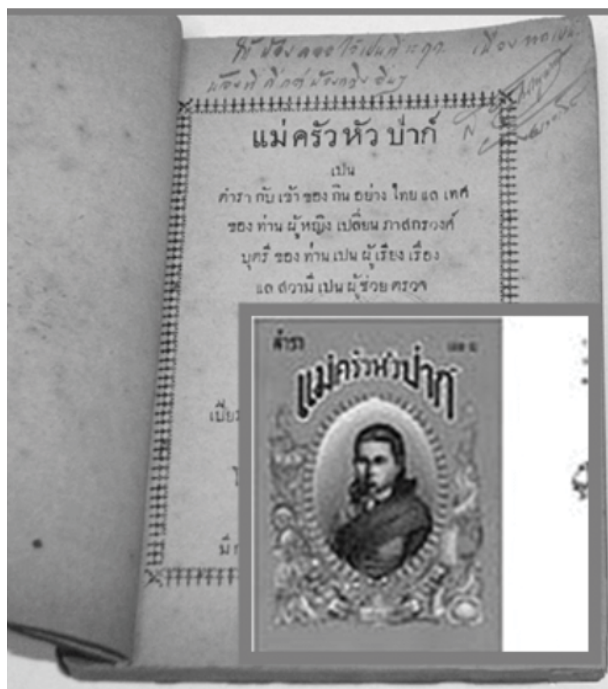


Figure 4: Lady Plian Bhasakaravansa

The first recipe book: แม่ครัวหัวป่าก์²⁶

Additionally, in this period, hot tea was a popular drink at home for the Siamese elite, the middle class, and the Buddhist monks. A large amount of tea leaves and fragrant teas were imported from China every year.²⁷ The upper-class were the first group to experience the influence of Western fashions and tastes and imported goods through foreign stores in Bangkok, such as Bad Man and Co. Store, Windsor Store, and S.A.B. Store.²⁸

²⁵ Sansani, "Krom Phra Sutthasiniat", 99 (in Thai).

²⁶ Gotoknow, "แม่ครัวหัวป่าหรือแม่ครัวหัวป่าก์เรื่องราวที่ทรงคุณค่า," 7 March 2555 <<http://www.gotoknow.org/posts/308106>>.

²⁷ Chaojom Momsadub, *Sarutanusorn*, 147 (in Thai).

²⁸ Chai, *Economic Aspects of Thai History from 1809–1910*, 331 (in Thai).

Conclusion

This article deals with the transformation of the culinary culture in relation to historical and social contexts in the era of modernization, with an emphasis on the reign of King Rama V of the Rattanakosin period, in which we can see how the period of modernization paved the way for change and assimilation in the eating culture in this era. Throughout many centuries, the eating etiquette in Western societies had been defined by more than just eating or putting food into the mouth. The Siamese elite began to use knives, spoons and forks instead of their hands in the early reigns of Rattanakosin period, and a century later, these manners spread to every class in Siamese society.

However, in the study of Western culture adoption into Thai society it was not necessary to consider only the court of King Chulalongkorn because Thai kings in the prior periods were always flexible as to whether or not to adopt any culinary cultures to be implemented within the royal court. However, when considering King Chulalongkorn's long reign, the researcher has found interesting aspects as to why the adoption of Western culture implemented in the royal court in this era can be explained and is more outstanding in Thai society than before.

After King Chulalongkorn visited other countries in Asia and Europe, Bangkok had close diplomatic relations with the Westerners and attempted to learn and understand all aspects of Western knowledge as the role model for modernization. Certainly, the new trend of modern royal cuisine and culinary culture officially occurred at the royal court of King Rama V, beyond the political and economical extension over the sovereignty of the country. While the king learned how to be like the West by imitating Western traditions, such as the way to dress, to eat, and to live, the king also used the formal royal banquet as a tool to promote the modernization of his people and the country. Thus, the adoption of Western culture in this period can be linked to the emergence of the modern royal cuisine and culinary culture among the elites which was a new phenomenon of Thai culinary culture.

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