

The Russo-Siamese Relations: The Reign of King Chulalongkorn

Natanaree Posrithong

Abstract

The long lasting Russo-Siamese relationship had officially established since 1897 when King Chulalongkorn paid his first visit to St-Petersburg. The welcoming attitudes of Tsar Nicholas II changed the Siamese diplomatic strategy in dealing with the European expansion completely. By the end of nineteenth century, Siam was encountering territorial conflicts with both major European powers, France and Britain. As a consequence of the 1893 Franco-Siamese War, Siam had converted into a “buffer” state. With its utter position, the Siamese King sought ways to preserve his predominance in the region. Hence, King Chulalongkorn headed to the road he termed “modernisation” which inspired him to realise the importance of imperial diplomacy. Four years after the Franco-Siamese war, the Siamese King had reached his way to one of the greatest royal courts of the world, the Romanov.

The main goal of this paper is to explore the origins of the relationship between the two royal courts of Russia and Siam as well as the legacy of the Russo-Siamese relations in the comparison of the *Russification* process to *Siamification* process.

Through primary records from the Thailand’s National Archives, books, and journals, this research will lead to the new discoveries of the history of Russo-Siamese relations in which still remain reserved for over one-hundred and twelve years since the two great Kings met.

Key Words: History of International Relations, Imperial Diplomacy, Territorial Conflict, Russification, Siamification

Introduction

The long lasting Russo-Siamese relationship started in 1891 when King Chulalongkorn paid his first visit to St-Petersburg. The welcoming attitudes of Tsar Nicholas II, to a great extent, influenced the Siamese diplomatic strategy in dealing with European expansion. Siam had been encountering territorial conflicts with both major European powers, France and Britain. As a consequence of the 1893 Franco-Siamese War, Siam had been converted into a “buffer” state. With its geo-political position, Siam sought different ways to preserve its predominance in the region. As a result, King Chulalongkorn headed to the road he termed “modernisation” which involved the importance of imperial diplomacy with the Western World. Four years after the Franco-Siamese war, the Siamese King had reached his way to one of the greatest royal courts of the world, the Romanov.

One of the main hypotheses of this discovery is to find out that the Siamese King’s visit to Europe was directly related to the territorial conflicts it was facing with the European expansionists, namely France and Britain. Literatures suggest that the King’s European visit was involved with the safeguarding of the political sovereignty of Siam. Karl Weber states in his article “Dynastic Diplomacy in the Fifth Reign: Siam’s Relations with German Bridgeheads” that King Chulalongkorn had chosen the ‘buffer strategy’ over the position of ‘buffer state’.¹ As a result, he had adopted the ‘pro-active’ stance against the colonial powers. Hence, this stance served Siam as the safeguard to colonialism. Weber’s term pro-active was tactical in this sense. The King’s European visits proved to be the outcome of the pro-active stance at this point. By allying with other European royalties, the King gained tremendous popularity. He became a “cousin of European royalty”, as Weber concluded.² A Thai scholar Thammanit also stressed the king’s pro-active position in *King Chulalongkorn: recorders of significant*

¹ Weber, K. (2004). Dynastic Diplomacy in the Fifth Reign: Siam’s Relations with German Bridgeheads. *Journal of European Studies. Chulalongkorn University*, 12 (1).

² Ibid.

events during his reign. The book provides a cohesive summary of important events in the Siamese history under the reign of King Chulalongkorn. Once again, the visits to Europe were praised most highly. Thammanit gave a similar account to Weber that the king had chosen to approach the West with the “pro-active” stance. He suggests that France’s influence on Indochina and Britain’s in Malaya were the major causes of the King’s second European visit in 1907 --- “to directly negotiate with France and Britain”. In addition, Thammanit also mentioned a special relationship the King had with Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany which served as the backup ground for the Siamese bargaining power.³

The visits to Europe were successful. King Chulalongkorn had proved to the European monarchs that he was a “civilized cousin of European royalty”. This appraisal was also given by Tsar Nicholas II of Russia. Chalong Soontarawanit states in his article “Politics behind the European visits” that Tsar Nicholas II had warmly hosted the King of Siam at St-Petersburg in 1897. Chalong also argues that as a result of this visit, the relationship between the two countries had been born.⁴ This highlights the starting point of the great friendship between the two leaders. Ever since then the Siamese and the Russians have initiated their diplomatic ties. Gorapin Taweta also mentions in her article “Long Lasting Russian-Thai Relationship” that the King Rama V had decided to send his son, H.RH. Prince Chakrabongse Bhuvanath to study military in Russia, after he has returned from his visit. One year later, the Tsar also appointed the First Charge d’Affairs, Mr. Alexandre Olarovsky, to Siam while Phraya Mahibal Borrirak was also sent to St. Petersburg as the first Siamese Ambassador in 1899.⁵ Therefore, both literatures have clearly emphasized the importance of the forming of the diplomatic foundation that began in this period.

³ Thammanit. (2008). *King Chulalongkorn: Autobiography*. Bangkok.

⁴ Chalong, S. (2001). *The King Rama the Fifth Visit’s to Europe: The 60th Year Anniversary*. Matichon, 227-268.

⁵ Gorapin, T. (nd.). Russia-Siam: The Lasting Relationship. *Sillapakorn University Journal*. 46 (6), p. 84.

Yet literatures already suggest that the Russo-Siamese relationship was born on the imperial playground, the true legacy of this friendship still had not been determined. Therefore, the main goals of this research are; first to explore the origins of the relationship between the two royal courts of Russia and Siam, and second to discover legacy of the imperial friendship. To do this, the research will be divided into three main chapters. Chapter One aims to examine the origins of Russo-Siamese relations in which records of the exchanges between the two royal courts since the first Czarevitch's visit to Siam (1891) will be studied. This includes personal promises the two leaders exchanged, i.e. records of princes who were sent off to study in Russia under the Tsar's guardianship. Chapter Two approaches the analysis of the diplomatic relations. This chapter analyses the role and the limitation of Russia in the Siamese-Franco conflict. Chapter Three examines the legacy of the Russo-Siamese relations. Through all these explorations, this study's final goal is to answer the question: *To what extent was the alliance with the Tsarist Russia important to Siam's sovereignty during the years of European colonialism?*

The Origin of the Russo-Siamese Relations

Many European countries had already established their relationships with Siam since the Ayutthaya period. However, the friendship with Russia was not formally established until 1891, with the first Russian visit of Czarevitch Nicholas to Siam.⁶ Ever since then the relationship between the two royal courts was initiated. This was highlighted by the process of royal exchanges and visits. Indeed, this bond was unique and distinct from most other foreign relations Siam initiated. It was founded on the royal affiliation rather than trade or colonial interests. Chalong Soontarawanit mentioned in his work *Russia - Thailand Relations during the reign of King Rama V to King Rama VI*, that Russia had no interests to colonize Siam.⁷ Neither

⁶ In Russian it means Crown Prince.

⁷ Chalong, S. (1973). *Russo-Siamese Relations: The Reign of Kings Rama Fifth and Sixth*. Bangkok.

were any trade agreements signed before the two royal families met. Even though K.A. Anquis, Captain of the Royal Navy ship “Gleyak”, suggests in his report to Foreign Ministry that Russia should open trade with Bangkok for cotton, sugar, pepper, and red wood; there was no response from Russia.⁸ Therefore, it is essential to explore the actual origin of the Russo-Siamese relations by dividing this chapter into three sub-parts; the Czarevitch’s visit to Siam, King Chulalongkorn’s visit to Europe, and other personal relations.

The Czarevitch’s visit to Siam 1891

King Chulalongkorn invited Crown Prince Czarevitch Nicholas to visit Siam through the Russian government with specific intentions. While it is apparent that Russia had no interest to colonize or even trade with Siam, Chulalongkorn had many reasons behind this invitation. First and most important, was the security reason. Siam was turned into a buffer state by the arrival of the two great colonial rulers, Britain and France. While Siam saw that Russia was the least harmful among all other European states to Siam’s security, the King initiated this royal relationship by sending his brother Prince Damrong to personally escort the Czarevitch from Singapore to Siam. In spite of the rumors of the outbreak of cholera, which were supposedly made up by Britain, Nicholas accepted the invitation most willingly. The King of Siam knew well that if he could establish a royal relationship with the Romanovs, Siam would gain bargaining power with France and Britain in the territorial disputes. Without a surprise, Chulalongkorn made sure that the Czarevitch was well received by the Siamese. The five-day visit of the Crown Prince was well planned and escorted by the King’s brothers. Siam showed to the Russian Prince that it also possessed what the West called “civilization”. Although King Chulalongkorn had never seen Europe until 1897, he had already carefully observed and studied

⁸ Committee Historical Documents. (1997). *100 Years of Russo-Siamese Relationship*. Thammasat University, Bangkok.

the Europeans from both personal interactions with foreign settlers and books. As a result, the Czarevitch's visit was tremendously successful. The prince mentioned as he was being received at the port:

Since the far away time when the embassy of Louis XIV arrived to this country, no visitors have been received with so much trust and warmth, and have been awaited with so much impatience and hope....The Siamese feel that we are not after their independence or their national existence. King Chulalongkorn has, it is said, made it known to his people that the Czarevitch must be welcomed as a national guest, even as a friend.⁹

The statement illustrates a clear attitude that the Russian Prince had towards this visit. He realised Chulalongkorn's position and wanted to ensure the King that his arrival was friendly and sincere. As a consequence, the King gained a great deal of trust from the Czarevitch and vice versa. Prince Uchtomskij, one of the followers of the Crown Prince during his visit in Siam and Saigon, described in his journal of the unforgettable journey in Siam that the Siamese treated the Czarevitch and his crew as distinguished guests. Moreover, Uchtomskij praised the Siamese people in their attitudes and the blissful culture. He even criticized the way the West have pictured the Siamese as being backward and uncivilized. The prince claimed "they (Siamese) are our brothers not only as to their external image but also according to common internal gifts".¹⁰

As it has been demonstrated, the first encounter between the two royal families was not a coincidence. Instead, it was carefully planned by King Chulalongkorn. Eventually, this success would lead to the growing relationship between the two states. The tie would strengthened through more visits i.e. Prince Damrong's visit to Russia

⁹Uchtomskij, P.E.E. (1997). *Czarevitch Nicholas of Russia in Siam and Saigon*. Bangkok, p. 7.

¹⁰Ibid., p. xxiii.



Fig. 1 King Chulalongkorn (left) and Tsar Nicholas II (right)

one year after the Czarevitch visited Siam. However, the Siamese-Russo history would only reach its turning point six years later when Chulalongkorn paid his first visit to Europe as not only a national guest but a friend of now Tsar Nicholas II.

King Chulalongkorn's visit to Europe 1897

The death of Tsar Alexander III at the age of forty-nine shocked the European affairs. However, when the news reached Siam, a new hope was born. In 1894, Chulalongkorn's good friend succeeded the Romanov throne. Czarevitch Nicholas was crowned Tsar Nicholas II. As the world was watching, how the young Tsar was going to reign in the vast Empire of Russia, the King of Siam continued to face tensions from the European rulers in Southeast Asia. The new hope that Chulalongkorn looked upon was the wish to persuade Russia into the region in order to increase his own bargaining power with Britain and France. Indeed the Siamese King had been encouraging Russia to get involved in the territorial affairs ever since the Czarevitch's visit. Nevertheless, nothing official had been established. Even though the

Czarevitch had shown his great appreciation from his previous visit to Siam in many of the records of his followers, Russia still refused to sign any bilateral agreements with Siam. In other words, Siam had been too unimportant to Alexander III throughout the period from around 1891-1894. Soon Siam's status was going to be more noteworthy, not by the Tsar's own will, but largely by Chulalongkorn's initiative.

Chulalongkorn said to R.A.S. Yonin, the Russian ambassador in Bern, Switzerland. "I am most grateful to be meeting with the representative from Russia. As I am now visiting Europe and all these great capitals, my most desired destination is Russia. Throughout these years, I've never forgotten his majesty's kindness given to Siamese people. Every time I think of it, I remember his majesty's visit as the great and most joyful cerebation".¹¹ This statement demonstrates that the King of Siam was ultimately determined to visit Russia and the Tsar. In other words, his Russian visit was the highlight of his voyage. Indeed, it was really the highlight for Chulalongkorn. The visit did not only strengthen the imperial friendship but also led to the establishment of the diplomatic relations and highlighted the status of Siam within the international context.

The establishment of the official diplomatic relations between the two countries was initiated right after the King returned from his European visit. The appointment of the first Russian Consul of Bangkok went to Alexander Olarovski, the Consul-General in New York. Olarovski was appointed on the 21st of February 1898, only half a year after the king's visit to St. Petersburg. Nicholas II clearly stated that "this appointment of to the first Russian Consul in Bangkok aims to institute a firm diplomatic relationship between the two nations besides our brotherhood (Chakri and Romanov) and our great friendship that have already been established".¹² This diplomatic establishment was also

¹¹ Committee Historical Documents. (1997). *100 Years of Russo-Siamese Relationship*. Thammasat University, Bangkok, p. 11-13.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 64-65.

seen as a very significant step for the Siamese government. Olarovski wrote to the Tsar that the King had granted the best building in Bangkok, close to the Grand Palace, to set up the first Russian Consulate. “Until now, there are no embassies of any countries that have as privileged location as ours”.¹³ Furthermore, he described the atmosphere of the reception of the opening of the embassy to be very impressive. He stated that as many as a hundred and seventy-five Siamese and a hundred and thirty Europeans attended the reception. This demonstrates that both Siamese nobility and European officials realised the importance of the new proclamation of Russo-Siamese diplomatic relations.¹⁴ Apart from the establishment of the new Russian Consulate in Bangkok, the first Thai Consul also arrived to St. Petersburg in 1898. This apparently completed the diplomatic affiliation between the two nations.

The confidential report from the Russian Foreign Ministry to Olarovski, dated the day he was appointed as Consul-General of Bangkok, demonstrates a significant evidence of Russia’s concerns over Siam’s situation. The report meant to prepare Olarovski to understand the root of the Siamese-Franco-Briton conflict and to confirm the main objectives of his new task as the first Consul-General in Bangkok. One part of the report states that Britain and France had agreed in the declaration in 1896 that the Mekong River was going to serve as the frontier between France and Siam. But later on, France violated the agreement by claiming the area on the right side of the Mekong (the Siamese side) and menaced to annex provinces in the south of Indochina bordering Siam such as, Battambang and Angkor.¹⁵ At this point, France was seen as one of the most dangerous foreign powers to Siam. Russia sympathised with this fact, but the Russo-Franco alliance had only recently been initiated. Russia could not afford to risk this special relationship just yet. Therefore, Olarovski’s main enemy in Siam

¹³ Committee Historical Documents. (1997). *100 Years of Russo-Siamese Relationship*. Thammasat University, Bangkok, p. 4-9.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 3-21.

was not France, but Britain. When the French never ceased their expansion in Southeast Asia, so did the British. Britain inserted its power into a region of Malaya which, according to a Russian report, was subservient to the Siamese control. Plus the Siamese educated nobles tended to admire and believe in British liberalism. These two reasons made Russia hostile to Britain's position in the region. The document advise Olarovski "to oppose the expansion of Britain in Indochina" by using the diplomatic means.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the document stresses that the most important task for Olarovski as the Consul-General was to ensure the status of Siam in order to treasure the great imperial friendship of the Emperor and the King. In addition, Nicholas II hoped that Olarovski would serve as the mediator to compromise and balance the power between France and Britain, while helping Siam maintain its sovereignty. Evidently, this was not going to be an easy task for Olarovski as tensions between the three states never ceased.

As one can see, Chulalongkorn's visit to Europe had not only strengthened the imperial friendship but, more importantly, increased Siamese bargaining power in the territorial conflicts by the support of Russia. As the King said "staying in Russia will ever remain the brightest memory of all my travels in Europe".¹⁷ Indeed, it will remain the brightest memory for the history of Siam as a whole.

Other Personal Relations

The Russo-Siamese relationship was not based solely on the exchange visits of the Tsar and the King. It also emerged on the ground of personal relationship, to the great extent, of the Siamese nobles. In fact, the first Siamese who visited imperial Russia was not King Chulalongkorn but his favourite brother, Prince Damrong. The Russian Consul-General in Singapore wrote to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Struve. (1897). *Letter from Master of the Court Struve 679/148*. Unpublished manuscript. National Archives of Thailand, Bangkok.

July 1891, only a few months after the Czarevitch's visit, to inform the Prince's visit to Russia. The letter praises Prince Damrong for his charm and his language skills. "Prince Damrong speaks English fluently and he is also Minister of Education".¹⁸ Moreover, the Consul mentioned that the Prince officially declared that he does not have any political agenda in his first Europe's visit. The main aim was to bring the Siamese royal insignia to the Tsar Alexander III. However, the Russian consul in Singapore strongly believed that Siam must have had political objectives behind the prince's visit, judging from its current situation.¹⁹ The Consul actually foresaw the conflicts of interests between France and Britain. He intentionally warned the Foreign Ministry to prepare an answer to the Prince's approach on the Franco-British conflict.



Fig. 2 Ekaterina Desnitskaya or Mom Catherine Chakrabongse (left), Chula Chakrabongse (middle), Prince Chakrabongse (right)

¹⁸ Committee Historical Documents. (1997). *100 Years of Russo-Siamese Relationship*. Thammasat University, Bangkok, p. 14-15.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Not until 1898 was the first Siamese student sent to study in Russia. Prince Chakrabongse arrived to Russia when he was only fifteen years old to enroll at the Royal Cadet Academy. Tsar Nicholas II responded to Chulalongkorn's wish to provide guardianship and accommodation for the Prince at the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg.²⁰ This adoption highlights the firm personal relationship between the two rulers. After finishing his education, Prince Chakrabongse was trusted by the tsar to serve as his royal page for a few years until he returned to Siam. While studying in Russia, the prince returned to his home country several times. Olarovski praised Chakrabongse in his letter to Russia that "the prince looked most elegant among all other nobles of Siam... he also has adopted the proper attitude as a cadet and was widely popular in both Siamese and European societies".²¹ At this point, it can be concluded that Prince Chakrabongse was one of the people who helped strengthen the Russo-Siamese friendship. As a result, one year after Prince Chakrabongse arrived to St. Petersburg, another noble, Prince Thongthikayu Thongyai, was also sent to enroll at the Royal Cadet Academy.²² Both of these nobles were going to contribute to building up of the Siamese military. Apart from the military, these two also challenged the conservativeness of the Siamese noble class by marrying Russian ladies. This aspect will later be explored in the last chapter on the legacy of the Russo-Siamese relationship.

Siamese students were not all faithful to the mother country, for example, in the case of Nai Phum, a non-noble scholarship student. The evidence demonstrates that Nai Phum had fled his government duty to return to Siam. After Nai Phum completed his education, he wrote to the Tsar:

*I arrived to Russia when I was only fourteen years old.
With the majesty's kindness, now I have completed my study at the
Royal Cadet Academy. The fact that I have left my home country*

²⁰ Ibid., p. 23-29.

²¹ Ibid., p. 86.

²² Ibid., p. 97.

for a long time makes me realise that Russia has now become my new home. I am most willing to dedicate my life to Russia as to repay for your majesty's kindness. I, therefore, ask your majesty for a permission to adopt Russian as my new nationality.²³

Nai Phum's decision to reside in Russia definitely upset the Siamese government. The evidence shows that the Siamese government had stopped sending students to Russia because of Nai Phum's case.²⁴ Not until 1913, were three nobles and one non-noble student sent to be educated in Russia.

The foundation of the great Russo-Siamese relationship, as demonstrated, is unique in its nature. It was based on all three origins; the Czarevitch's visit to Siam, the King Chulalongkorn's visit to Russia, and finally the other personal relationships between the Siamese and Tsar Nicholas II. Whether this relationship is going to benefit Siam as it expected, will be approached in the next chapter.

The Russian role in the Siamese-Franco affairs

The Siamese-Franco conflict had started since the early 1890s as explored in the first part of this paper. However, the situation became most intensive in 1893 with the Paknam incident. As it has been demonstrated earlier, the relationship of the Romanov and Chakri families was initiated with political objectives from the Siamese side. The prime goal of Czarevitch's invitation to Siam (1891), Prince Damrong's visit to Europe (1891), and later King Chulalongkorn's visit to Europe (1897) were all to do with the conflict that Siam was facing with the two colonial empires of Britain and France. With Chulalongkorn's modern mind and great intellect, he thought Russia was going to be the best ally for Siam to help balance the power on the negotiation table. Indeed, the King made the right decision. There were various reasons why Russia was chosen to be the "mediator" for

²³ Ibid., p. 2.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 11-12.

Siam during the territorial conflict with France. According to Kraireuk Nana, the author of *Behind the Czarevitch's visit to Siam: The New Vision of Politics during King Rama V* (2009), there are two main factors that made Russia the most suitable ally to Siam. First, the dispute over the Balkan and the Russian encroachment into Northern China through Siberia made Britain naturally made Russia's main enemy.²⁵ Both areas mentioned were of course considered to be under the British influence. In order to protect the naval power in the Mediterranean, the British supported the Turks to defend the Tsarist dream to expand its power downwards. Meanwhile, the result of the Opium War also gave confidence to Britain that it would have its firm hands over this vast territory of East Asia. However, China surprisingly granted the permission for Russia to build the Tran-Siberia railway through Manchuria, which shook the British secured position in the region. Second, the Franco-Russian alliance in 1894 was seen as the way for Siam to get to negotiate with France by using Russia as the mediator.²⁶ This alliance gave foundation to the military cooperation between the two powers later during the First World War. Besides the Security Pact, Russia also received a four thousand million francs loan from France for the construction of the Tran-Siberia railway. Both of these factors highlight that Russia was the most suitable ally for Siam at the time. In addition, the unique Russian position also contributed to King's choice of alliance. As Russia demonstrated that it had no colonial aim in Southeast Asia, Russia consequently gained the trust of Siam. Therefore, all of these reasons made Russia a perfect Siamese imperial partner in the midst of the colonial quest. In order to understand the role of Russia in the Franco-Siamese conflict, this part of the paper will be divided into two components; first, the role of Russia through the work of Alexander Olarovski; second, the limitations of the Russian role.

²⁵ Graireuk, N. (2009). *Behind the Czarevitch Nicholas' Visit to Siam: The New Political Phase of King Chulalongkorn*. Bangkok. p. 91.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

Franco-Siamese conflict and Alexander Olarovski

When Olarovski was appointed as the Consul-General of Siam, his two major tasks were to first defend Siam from other foreign aggression, second, to act as the mediator between Siam and France as mentioned in the confidential letter from the Foreign Ministry.²⁷ Therefore, it is quite reasonable to say that, to a great extent, the Russians had been backing the position of Siam against France. Even though later on Russia would find that it was more important to preserve the Russo-Franco alliance than to defend a small kingdom, Olarovski had shown the effort to pursue his task as a protector of Siam. This effort is highlighted in many of the early Olarovski reports sent to St. Petersburg. Especially on the issue of Luang Prabang, Olarovski had demonstrated that he had sympathy for Siam. He claimed that the French had the wrong perception of the relationship between Siam and Luang Prabang and so that caused a dispute for which Siam should not be blamed.²⁸ However, he also foresaw that there were no other solutions for Siam to this dispute apart from ceding Luang Prabang to France in order to prevent further complications.²⁹

Eventually, Luang Prabang was ceded to France. Nevertheless, Olarovski was, at some point, successful in trying to improve the Franco-Siamese relations. This was seen in the telegraph from the Russian ambassador in Paris to the Russian Foreign Ministry which mentioned that the Siamese representative and Foreign Minister of France had successfully signed the treaty confirming the Siamese control over Chantaboon.³⁰ Although at the latter stage Siam saw this gain more as a loss because it had to trade with France a large portion

²⁷ Committee Historical Documents. (1997). *100 Years of Russo-Siamese Relationship*. Thammasat University, Bangkok, p. 3-21.

²⁸ Olarovski, A. (1898). *Letter to Count Muraviev 493/1780*. Unpublished manuscrypt. National Archives of Thailand, Bangkok.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Committee Historical Documents. (1997). *100 Years of Russo-Siamese Relationship*. Thammasat University, Bangkok, p. 207-208.

of land on the left side of the Mekong, this agreement would not have succeeded without the help of Olarovski. The Russian Consul-General in Bangkok indeed helped Siam regain Chantaboon, the province that the King claimed had more Siamese settlements, from France. Without Olarovski, Franco-Siamese relationship might have had died completely after 1893. In contrast, within four years, there was a slight sign of peace between the two nations, mostly through the effort of the Russian Consul-General.

Limitations to the Russian role in the Franco-Siamese conflict

Chalong Soontarawanit claims that Olarovski was assertive to help Thailand solve the territorial conflict with the French only at the beginning of his post in Bangkok.³¹ The author believes that Olarovski's attitude had changed. His close relationship with Dumer, Governor-General of French Indochina (1897-1902), and the Russian plan to construct a fuel station in one of the French controlled islands were the two key factors to the changed approach, which tilted towards France.³² However, it is important to note at this point that there were other limitations besides the failure of Olarovski's effort to the role of Russia in the Franco-Siamese conflict. These limitations were: Russia's instability and resistance from the Pro-British Siamese elites.

Russia had established a Russo-Franco Alliance since 1894, and Siam believed that the result of this association would be beneficial to Siam's position. Therefore, it is not a surprise that Chulalongkorn would make use of the royal relationship that had begun in 1891 with the Czarevitch. There are various reasons for the establishment of the Russo-Franco Alliance. The major reason was to do with both nations' common enemy, Germany. By this time, Russia considered France as the major ally that it chose to turn to and, of course, France thought vice versa. Due to a strategic position of Russia and an abundance of

³¹ Chalong, S. (1973). *Russo-Siamese Relations: The Reign of Kings Rama Fifth and Sixth*. Bangkok.

³² Ibid.

resources including manpower, Russia was seen as the perfect ally for France.³³ Nevertheless, Russia's position started to decline by 1904 with the war against Japan. The result of the war was a humiliation of the Emperor of Russia, who had lost the war to the newly minted Asian Empire. This defeat not only highlighted the fall of the Russian monarchy, but it also signaled that Russia was going to have to strengthen its relationship with other European powers in order to save its own face. Hence, the relationship with the major ally, France, was strengthened. As a consequence, the importance of Siam then became less visible. Moreover, Russia demonstrated its growing fear towards Japan's influence in Indochina in 1908 in the confidential letter from the Russian Foreign Ministry to the newly appointed ambassador to Bangkok. It mentioned that Japan had established a diplomatic relationship with Siam since 1898 and still wanted to assert more power in Indochina as a whole.³⁴ Therefore the most important advice for the new ambassador was to keep his eyes close to the imperialist Japan's role in Indochina, not only for the safeguard of Siam but mainly for the impact on the Russian relations with the other European nations, i.e. France and Britain. In addition, this letter also states another evidence that demonstrates the decline of the Siam's importance to Russia itself. It suggested that Russia should, from now on, keep a distance from the Siamese affairs with the three following nations: France, Britain, and Japan. Plus, the relationship with France was to be upheld always in Russian affairs.³⁵ At this point, one can actually say that the Siamese hope for Russian safeguard had practically ended. Comparing this letter to the letter sent to Olarovski ten years ago, Russia had changed its attitude completely.

³³ Graireuk, N. (2009). *Behind the Czarevitch Nicholas' Visit to Siam: The New Political Phase of King Chulalongkorn*. Bangkok. p. 120.

³⁴ Committee Historical Documents. (1997). *100 Years of Russo-Siamese Relationship*. Thammasat University, Bangkok, p. 26-31.

³⁵ Ibid.

Another very important limitation to the role of Russia in the Siamese-Franco conflict was resistance to Russian help from the pro-British elites in Siam. Olarovski admitted in his report to Russian Foreign Ministry that there were a number of the pro-British members of the Siamese court, who tended to build the safeguard against the Russian involvement in political affairs.³⁶ Since France was the main Russian ally, the pro-British elites felt that it was rather difficult to trust the Russian motive. Therefore, this can be considered as an internal resistance Russia faced in the arbitration process between Siam and France.

The Legacy

The special relationship between the Romanov and the Chakri dynasties had faded since the 1917 Bolshevik revolution. After Nicholas II abdicated the throne, a new chapter of Russian History was only about to begin. Meanwhile, Siam still had to go through a period of reformation towards modernization. One has to thank Britain and France, for the force that pressured Chulalongkorn to initiate the Siamese reformation. Thongchai Winichakul mentioned in his work, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-body of a Nation*, that the crisis in 1893 was the “culminating moment of the emergence of the geo-body of Siam”.³⁷ In other words, the Thai national identity had been shaped through the forces of the colonial conquests. However, giving credit to the British and French is not enough. The Siamese owed most part of this promotion of the “Thai” national identity ---Siamification--- to Russia. And that is a true long lasting legacy of the imperial friendship that needs further exploration.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 101-110.

³⁷ Thongchai, W. (1994). *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-body of a Nation*. Silkworms: Hawaii: Hawaii University Press, p. 142.

Chulalongkorn vs. Nicholas II

Although both nations shared the common political scheme, with the royal family as the absolutist rule of the state, the nature of politics in the two kingdoms were relatively different if one explores in details. According to Maurizio Peleggi, the Siamese monarchy had been a great civilizing agent of modernity most apparently during the reigns of King Chulalongkorn and King Mongkut.³⁸ Indeed, the Siamese “civilization” became a clearer picture during Mongkut’s reign. However, one should not forget that the great foundation was already laid since Chulalongkorn. In other words, Mongkut could not have succeeded his civilizing mission without his modern minded father, as Thai academics always praised Chulalongkorn’s great diplomatic skills that had saved Siam from the colonial danger of the nineteenth century. To a great extent, the statement is true. The fact that the King chose to ally with Russia by inviting the Czarevitch to visit Siam was a great evidence of his adroit strategy.

Peleggi argues that the “primary goals of the Chakri Reformation were the establishment of the monarchy’s authority over a newly bounded national territory and the uplifting of its prestige in the international arena”.³⁹ From this statement, there are two main keys to point out; first, the centralisation of the administration and second, this reformation aimed at gaining a better position internationally. The uniformity is probably the best term to define the reformation in the administration of Siam during Chulalongkorn’s reign. Centralization was promoted through reforms in administration and education. For example, school textbooks became standardized under the government’s supervision. Moreover, the military was also uniformed with the first Cadet School was founded in 1887.

³⁸Peleggi, M. (2002). *Lords of Things: The Fashioning of the Siamese Monarchy’s Modern Image*. Hawaii: Hawaii University Press, p. 10.

³⁹Ibid., p. 9.

Of the Chakri's reforms, the most far-reaching were the social reforms. It came as a surprise for the court when the King "announced the abolition of the ancient practice of prostrating before the monarch, which he regarded as unsuitable for a modern nation" at his coronation in 1873.⁴⁰ Ever since then, the Siamese court had been acting as an agent of civilization. However, the most remarkable social change that carried out extensively was the abolition of slavery. Besides the great image the king gained from this populist policy, he also changed the whole root of Thai society towards modernization. Indeed, in an ordinary Siamese person's eyes, these changes might be too obscure for them to understand. However, the major purpose of these modern reforms was to attract the Western attention that Siam was as civilized as the European nations.

In contrast to Chulalongkorn, Nicholas II chose to pursue the policy of his father, Alexander III. His reign was marked by "reaction, repression, and a pathological fear of change".⁴¹ While liberalism became more and more popular in Europe, Russian conservatism that is already firmly established grew even stronger. The young Tsar opposed liberal reforms and saw them as threats to Russian stability. Therefore, on the one hand he was known to the world as the great emperor of the Russian Empire, on the other hand he was seen as "narrow-minded, weak, and unusually dependent upon the advice of others" including his ministers and the Tsarina Alexandra.⁴² One similarity between the two monarchs was the common supporting group of the regimes which were mainly the gentry. The gentry still maintain its extensive control in Russia. However in the case of Russia, most of the aristocrats were known as the backward group whose only aims were to seek their

⁴⁰Federal Research Division of the Library Congress, *Chulalongkorn's reforms*. Retrieved February 26, 2010, from <http://www.country-data.com/cgi-bin/query/r-13687.html>

⁴¹Smith, G.B. (1992). *Soviet Politics: Struggling with Change*. New York, p. 25.

⁴²Ibid. p. 26.

own benefits. Most of the provincial governors who controlled the countryside on behalf of the Tsar usually “sought only to preserve their own interests”.⁴³ Indeed, the elites anywhere would do the same, to seek the highest benefits, when they had the ability to do so. The one distinct common character of the Siamese elites that differed from the Russian aristocrats was the former’s modern-mindset. In Siam, the King tried every way to promote modernity together with the loyalty oath to the nation. Therefore, the Siamese king was considered to be a more modern and stronger monarch than Nicholas II. While occupied by wars, Nicholas heavily relied on his wife who was lured into the influence of the unpopular monk Gregorii Rasputin. This affair not only marked the decline of the Romanov’s reputation but it also demonstrates another weak character which defines the reign of Nicholas. On the contrary, Chulalongkorn had never lifted his firm grip over the ruling of Siam. So even the two monarchs were true absolutists, Chulalongkorn’s rule, to a higher extent, was more rigid than the Russian emperor’s. Nonetheless, one should keep in mind that the Russian political situation before 1905 was not as threatening as it was for Siam. Russia, by 1904, had completed the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway, which highlighted the Russian engaging policies in the Far-East. Together with the Russo-Franco Alliance, Russia could still maintain the status as the most resourceful and powerful empire of Europe. In contrast to Siam, which would unlikely have survived colonization if it was not because of Chulalongkorn’s awareness and diplomatic capability.

Although the two characters’ weaknesses and strengths differed due to distinct political backgrounds, there was one policy that they had in common--- the promotion of cultural domination. To do this, both Siamese and Russians sought to reduce the cultural powers of other ethnic groups and gradually (or in some cases forcefully) assimilated them into the dominant culture.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 25.

Russification vs. Siamification

The terms Russification and Siamification are not only similar in their verbal structures but also in their implications. While the Russians had started the process of Russification since the time of Alexander III, the Siamese King was most likely to have been influenced by it and decided to adopt the policy during his remarkable reign of modernization in the late nineteenth century. At the time Siam adopted this policy, one might have not thought that it would become one of the most extensive and lasting legacy of the Siamese history. Therefore, the aim of this part is to explore and demonstrate the true origins for the Siamese adoption of the policy and how it has become the legacy of Russian-Siamese relationship.

The vast territory and the diverse ethnicities always had been the major concerns of the Tsarist Empire. While Siam's territory could not be compared that of Russia, it was the latter problem that was apparent. Siam was composed of a number of distinct ethnic groups of people such as Khmers, Laos, Malays, Chinese and Tais.⁴⁴ As Chang Noi claims Thailand is a "melting pot" of various cultural elements.⁴⁵ Similarly, Russia's vast area was comprised of various cultures and people such as, Ukrainians, Belarusans, Lithuanians, Poles, Finns, and Jews. As a result, Russia had been promoting *Russification* since 1863. The policy became more intense from the reigns of Alexander III to Nicholas II. Theodore Weeks mentions in his journal that since the failed uprising in 1863, Ukrainians and Belarusans were no longer recognized as nationalities "but simply as branches of the Russian nation".⁴⁶ The rejection to the acknowledgment of other nations was the first step to the process of

⁴⁴ Tai is one of the major cultures of Asia, alongside those of India and China. The Tai peoples, scattered in a band across Southeast Asia from southwest China to eastern India, are a major population group.

⁴⁵ Chang Noi.(August 14, 1999). *What does 'Thai' really mean?.* The Nation. Bangkok.

⁴⁶ Weeks, T. R.(Spring, 2001). Russification and the Lithuanians, 1863-1905, *Slavic Review*, 16 (1), pp. 96-114.

Russification. Then the next step is assimilation. In case of the Finns, Nicholas attempted to assimilate them into Russian culture through language. The Manifesto of Nicholas II to the Grand Duchy of Finland in 1900 stated that “the Russian language should after gradual steps be adopted as the principal language in matters concerning the administration of the region”.⁴⁷ The document clearly demonstrates that Russia forced the use of Russian language as the official language of Finland. This was of course with the intention to turn the Finns into Russians culturally, which is considered to be the second step of Russification.

Russification, indeed, brought ‘security’ and ‘domination’ to Russian control over its enormous empire. In the same way, Siam’s major concerns in the late nineteenth century were also surrounded around the same concepts of ‘security’ and ‘domination’. However, it is sensible to argue that Siam’s need for Siamification was far greater than Russia’s Russification due to the colonial factor. Unlike Russia, the minorities of Siam were not seen as threats to Chulalongkorn. In fact, the diverse ethnic groups had been living together quite peacefully under the dominance of the Siamese monarchy. Nevertheless, it is most important to keep in mind that the colonial aggressions of Britain and France were the main causes for Siam’s need of Siamification.

For Siam, the promotion of Siamese, as a dominant culture, was considered largely as part of the process of modernization. Peleggi said Chulalongkorn’s most important concern was the promotion of his image as “the King of the Siamese rather the King of Siam”.⁴⁸ This statement clearly demonstrates that the most essential element of the Siamese modernization was the Siamese identity. Hence Siamification was introduced not only to assimilate the people into Siamese, but it also

⁴⁷ Kruhse, P. 1900. *The Collection of Decrees for the Grand Duchy of Finland. Nr 22*. Retrieved March 1, 2010, from <http://www.histdoc.net/history/kieli1900.html>

⁴⁸ Peleggi, M. (2002). *Lords of Things: The Fashioning of the Siamese Monarchy’s Modern Image*. Hawaii: Hawaii University Press, p. 9.

served as a main ingredient of modernization. In Chulalongkorn's eyes, Siam was in desperate need to build up a strong nation in order to resist the European aggressions. As a consequence, most of his reforms, which some claim to have seen copied directly from the West, were aimed at the progression towards modernization or *siwilai*, another adoption from English for the condition of being civilized. As Siamification was the most important foundation to promote a strong nation, the policy was carried out in a similar way to Russification but with less violence. One could thank Prince Damrong for the great success of Siamification. The nationhood concept or *Prathed Chat* was fully implemented by 1911. In Pasuk's chapter "the Absolutist State", she claims that the term 'chat' (birth) when combined with the word "prathed" (territory, country) means a people living together within a defined geographical space, hence a nation.⁴⁹ This notion was created to indicate that all the people who were born in the Siamese territory were of the Thai race. In addition, the Nationality Act was passed in 1911, despite the aims to unify the country in order to balance power with the West; it also established a key foundation of kingship, now that the nation had a single community with one king. The Act relegates all people born in the recently mapped kingdom of Siam, regardless of ethnic origins as subjects. Ever since, the Siamese identity was created.

The process of Siamification was not much different from Russification. It involved the promotion of various cultural values, most primarily, language. The central Thai language was widely promoted throughout the Siamese territory. A Russian report on Siam states that Siam can be divided into three main regions: North, Central, and South. One of the more remarkable aspects of this document is the emphasis on the Northern part of Siam. The report mentions that the north is mostly populated by ethnic Lao, who speak a different language from the

⁴⁹ Pasuk, P & C. Baker. (1997). *Thailand Economics and Politics: Chapter 7 Absolutist State*. Oxford: Oxford Press, p. 234.

Siamese.⁵⁰ Now that Siam has emerged as a ‘geo-body’, the problem fell on the Lao people in the northeast. Mayoury and Pheuiphanh refer to Don T. Bayard of Otago University who affirms that “fifty years ago the areas north and east of Nakhon Ratchasima province up to and across the Mekong were almost all Lao-speaking, with very few people fluent in the language of Central Thailand”.⁵¹ Siam’s first attempt to introduce the use of the Central Thai language to all administrative and educational institutions was indeed extensively successful. Today people in this plateau belong to a centralized Siam. Most of these people are bilingual and it is predicted that by Bayard that by the next generation the Lao language will be replaced by the central Thai dialect. Those who should be rewarded for this success are the people in the bureau who have managed the system of ‘Siamification’ so well that in only a few decades, for the Lao people in Isan already felt more loyalty to Bangkok than to Vientiane. Siamification is the lasting legacy from the process of modernization that Chulalongkorn copied directly from the Tsarist Russia.

Conclusion

The outcome of Siamification proved to be even more extensive and successful than Russification. One of the major factors contributing to this success may have come from Chulalongkorn’s own image that was portrait to be “siwilai” to the eyes of the Siamese elites. In contrast to Nicholas’ image, the Siamese king managed to extend his influence and power over the area encompassing Thailand today. Lao people who live on the Khorat plateau in modern-day Northeastern Thailand have become *Thai Isaans*. The Malays in the south also became *Thai Muslims*. The Lao origin settlers in the north also became *Lanna Thais*.

⁵⁰ Committee Historical Documents. (1997). *100 Years of Russo-Siamese Relationship*. Thammasat University, Bangkok, p. 130-134.

⁵¹ Mayoury & P., Ngaosyvathn, Kith and Kin politics (1994). The relationships between Laos and Thailand, *Journal of Contemporary Asia Publishers*. Manila: Philippines and Wollongong: Australia, p. 25.

As the evidence shows, Siamification has been to a great extent, more successful than Russification judging from its lasting end result. In terms of language, central Thai language is the one and only official language and language of instruction in all public schools in Thailand. However the most important element that holds the country together is the great image of the Thai royal family, which is one of the three elements of the Thai unifying Slogan; Nation, Religion (Buddhism), and the King. This distinct character is what made the Chakri dynasty stronger than the Romanov by the end of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the Siamese monarch could not have had survived the colonial quests without the Russian help. Even though Russia did not resolve the Siamese problem due to its many limitations, its alliance was essential to the position of Siam in the international arena.

At every step of the Russo-Siamese relationship, there was a benefit for Siam. Since the first part of this essay, the study explores that the firm foundation of the imperial relationship was laid for the benefit of Siam. This gave new status and reputation to Siam for its modern-minded attitude. As a consequence when Siam was challenged by France in 1893, it did not fear to ask for help from the Tsarist Empire. One can probably argue at this point that if Russia did not establish the Russo-Franco alliance, Siam might have not lost the territories it claimed. Due to the failed negotiations Siam had lost a large piece of land that it claimed, but this resembles a double edged sword. On one hand, Siam obviously was humiliated by its decreased domination in Indochina. However, on the other hand, Siam took this opportunity to adopt the policy of Siamification to build up a strong nationhood for its remaining territory. That is the true legacy of not only the Siamese-Russo relations but also for the Siamese modernization. In other words, Siamification was a drive towards a successful establishment of a modern centralised kingdom.

Nonetheless, no one can fully say proudly that this “melting pot” is still consistently and peacefully assimilated under the same unifying slogan. Problems of minorities emerged in a form of “reversed-discriminations” are becoming apparent while the Central Thainess that has been acting as a unifying factor for the past century is beginning to recede. As foreign texts are becoming more available to the Thais, new

theories challenging the concept of the artificial Thainess became more popular. It is perhaps time for the Thai authority to start thinking of a different means to keep this melting pot together in peace.

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