

# GSAPS THE SUMMARY OF DOCTORAL THESIS

On His Majesty's Foreign Service:

The "Royal" Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Legitimacy of the Siamese Absolutist State (1885-1919)

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The main goal of this study is to investigate the emergence and development of the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) from 1885-1919 under the reign of King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868-1910) and King Vajiravudh (r. 1910-1925). It was the period when Siam was encountering imperial encroachments, which forced changes in Siam's traditional political organizations, including the foreign service. During this period, the MFA emerged and served as a sole channel for Siam's sovereigns to communicate with the outside world. The main argument of this study is that the MFA legitimized the absolutist state amidst the colonial condition. The Ministry has been an exclusive domain of the royal elites, which, in effect, protected and played a crucial role in reviving the core element of the absolutist regime.

In doing so, this study relies on the conceptual framework of "crypto-colonialism" and colonial modernity. These notions propose that colonial conditions not only imposed a threat toward Siam. It also provides intellectual and administrative tools for local elites to reappropriate traditional elements to meet Western standards. Under this condition, Siam achieved preserving independence in relation to the dominant imperial order. This study argues that the MFA possessed such condition. The Ministry witnessed the coexistence of the subjective modernization to meet with the Western models and the reinterpretation of Siam's traditional political system. To reveal such feature, this dissertation firstly traces back to the traditional elements, which served as the precondition for modernization and subsequently had been reinterpreted to meet Eurocentric expectations. The focal point is the premodern MFA or the so-called *Krom Tha*, particularly during the early nineteenth century.

*Krom Tha* was home to multi-ethnic noblemen like Persian, Mon, Chinese, and Portuguese due to their linguistic and diplomatic skills. These noblemen later served as the first generation of the Siamese diplomatic corps. The Persian Bunnag family apparently dominated the Ministry thanks to their inherited skills and intermarriage with the royal family. *Krom Tha*'s duties also exposed them and other *Krom Tha* officials to Western knowledge through maritime trade and treaty negotiations. This condition contributed to the formulation of a certain worldview among these noblemen and some royalties. It was the so-called "bourgeois culture," the term coined by Nidhi Eoseewong. In short, the worldview generated the tendency among Siamese elites to resolve conflicts in a compromising and open-minded manner for Western knowledge. Arguably it was the rationale behind the peaceful modernization of Siam.

The early nineteenth century also saw Siam expanded its control toward multi-ethnic entities like Lao, Khmer, and Malay. These areas and populations subsequently became contested arenas between Siam vis-à-vis Western powers in the process of forging up Siam as a territorial state.

By the 1880s, Western expectation about the legitimacy of the succession line allowed Rama V to enhance his claim as the sole power wielder. He reinterpreted the customs of the Second King and the royal succession line to rightly secure the throne for his bloodline. The Anglo-French rivalry also witnessed London's support for Rama V's scheme to ward off Paris's attempt to assert its authority in Siam. This coincided desire helped Rama V to takeover *Krom Tha* and transformed it into the MFA in 1885. The conciliatory tendency prompted the Bunnag's peaceful concession of their influential position. In effect, Chulalongkorn could officially proclaim his

design on succession traditions to international recipients, which cemented "charisma of blood" for his bloodline. To further maintain his lineage's legitimacy, the King appointed Prince Dewan, his half-brother and a full brother of his three principal queens, as the Foreign Minister. Dewan's close relatives or the "Queen Faction" had dominated the MFA for many decades.

Aside from securing the right for his bloodline, Rama V could simultaneously lay claim on territorial rights across all frontiers based on reinterpreted traditional inter-state relationship. It prompted Siam to involve and dispute with Britain and France.

From 1885-1893, the MFA served as the central command center for Rama V and Dewan to incorporate frontier tributaries into the emerging Siamese state. MFA overconfidently upheld Siam's claims vis-a-vis France, which culminated in the Paknam Crisis in 1893. Siamese elites plunged into negotiation tables in Europe, where they found their leverage alarmingly inferior to their European counterparts. The King's visit to Europe to carry out the negotiation by himself in 1897 also did not improve the situation much. Siam would enmesh in series of unending negotiations with France for more than a decade. The protracted negotiations with France proved that the MFA was ill-equipped and needed an urgent overhaul. Chulalongkorn recalled the service of former seasoned *Krom Tha* officials and heavily relied on foreign advisers to address the inefficiency. However, he preserved Dewan at the MFA. "Queen Faction" enjoyed its exclusive position for the security of Chulalongkorn's succession line. What emerged was the coexistence between developing modern functioning ministry and royalist elements. With the reformed mechanism, Siam, under overseer of foreign advisers, came up with clear negotiating tactics, in addition to favorable international circumstances, particularly the Entente Cordiale in 1904. Sticking territorial issues eventually concluded in 1909.

In 1910, King Vajiravudh ascended to the throne in accordance with Chulalongkorn's design. He also inherited the MFA under Dewan and preserved such conditions while introduced many reforms to other branches. Siam emerged as a victor of the Great War and joined the League of Nations with full dignity and equality with other member states. It allowed Siam to begin the revision of unequal treaties. However, the colonial mindset and racial political vision remained there. Siamese elites were aware of the condition and chose to avoid upsetting Western powers. The result was slow progress in negotiations, but it sure did guarantee the continuation of the regime. However, not all Siamese were satisfied with the pace, which became one of the impetus for the 1932 Revolution. Although the absolutist regime had eclipsed, the MFA remained loyalist and relentlessly resisted the new regime. They were the main force in reviving the royal family back into the political scene during the Post-War period. Apparently, MFA's missions like independence of Siam or negotiations for the extraterritorial right was only matter if it related to the survival of the Chakri dynasty.

## References

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