

SUZERAIN - TRIBUTARY RELATIONS: AN ASPECT OF TRADITIONAL SIAMESE STATECRAFT (c.19th CENTURY)

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of Siamese administrative system in the 19th century. It will focus in particular on the relations between the Siamese King who was the suzerain ruler and his tributary or vassal (Thai: *muang prathetsarat*) states located in the outlying peripheral areas. The relations were conducted through a variety of mechanisms such as the participation of tributary rulers in state ceremonies, the acceptance of the insignia to rule from the monarch and the periodic payment of taxes and tribute. All these methods comprised, collectively, a significant part of Siamese statecraft in the past. The paper will explore the following questions: (i) What was a *prathetsarat*? (ii) What were its obligations towards its suzerain or overlord? (iii) Likewise, what were the responsibilities of a suzerain ruler to his *prathetsarat*? These questions will help explain the purpose and effectiveness of the traditional Siamese tributary (state) system.

Keywords: Statecraft, suzerain, tributary, Siamese King, and prathetsarat

ADMINISTRATION

The Kingdom of Siam in the nineteenth century was composed of three administrative levels. These were the inner provinces, the outer provinces, and the tributary states¹. The capital city was the centre of administration. It was in the capital city that the palace of the Siamese monarch was located. The capital city was surrounded by the provinces and smaller districts. Although these provinces were ruled by chiefs who were either appointed or approved by the ruler, the degree of their submission to the capital depended on the effective power of the ruler as well as the distance between the capital and the districts. The extent of power enjoyed by a monarch was believed to radiate from the centre outwards. In other words, the personal power of the ruler decreased in proportion to the distance of an area from the capital, that is, conversely, the power of the local chieftain increased the further he was from the capital. Communication difficulties arising from the distance between the capital and provincial states led to situations whereby the local chiefs were fairly autonomous and they sometimes ruled almost independently. A local chief needed only to refrain from an open challenge to the authority of a monarch to avoid intervention or direct interference from the centre. The centre was, in theory, militarily stronger and the King commanded resources which were usually sufficient to enable him to subdue any challenge to his authority from the provinces.

In the old Siamese Buddhist context, a powerful monarch was one who had sufficient *bun baramii* (merit and the expression of merit) to conquer and rule effectively. He was able to mobilise a large army of men which enabled him to subdue his enemies. King Ram Kamhaeng (1277-1317) of the Sukhotai period, Naresuan (1590-1605) of Ayutthaya, and Taksin (1767-1782) of the Thonburi period are identified in Siamese history as powerful monarchs.

A Buddhist King gained legitimacy for his rule on the basis of his accumulated *bun* or merit. If the people of his kingdom experienced prosperity, peace and other blessings, then the ruling King was said to have great *bun*. In contrast, the decline of prosperity and glory or the absence of tranquility during his reign was interpreted as a decline and therefore the end of his personal *baramii* (expression of merit) to rule. Phya Taksin, who defeated the Burmese after the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767, was said to have had sufficient *bun* to declare himself King. But the powerful rule of King Taksin ended with his death, only fifteen years after he occupied the throne. In 1782, Taksin was said to be insane and he was executed by his successor, General Chaophraya Chakri. Thus Taksin was said to have had sufficient *bun* to be a King but it was insufficient to last him a lifetime². In the same year, Chaophraya Chakri (later Rama I) was crowned King. This marked the beginning of the Chakri Dynasty in Siam.

A Siamese (Buddhist) King, by tradition, is also a *dharmaraja* or King of righteousness. He has in him the ten virtues or *dharma* based on the tenets of Buddhism. The ten virtues are: almsgiving, morality, liberality, rectitude, gentleness, self-restriction, non-anger, non-violence, forbearance and non-obstruction.³ The glory of his Kingdom and the prosperity of his people are a direct outcome of the possession of these virtues. In other words, a *dharmaraja* ensures that his people enjoy glory and prosperity. Likewise, if he lacks virtue and merit, his state and people will suffer hardship. The institution of kingship which is central in Siam is closely linked to the well-being of the state and its people. A *dharmaraja* must be known for his just and meritorious deeds. In short, he is the embodiment of the virtues and teachings of Buddhism. As such, the King is the source and, at the same time, defender of everything which is virtuous; the state and his people are the beneficiaries.

THE INNER AND OUTER PROVINCES

Since the fifteenth century, the inner provinces represented the core of the Kingdom. These provinces were located within a short distance from the capital. There were four classes of inner provinces, based on their distance from the capital. The fourth class were those closest and the first class were those furthest from the capital. The chief officials of the inner provinces were referred to as acting governors or magistrates (*phu rang*).⁴

The outer provinces were those which "lay between the inner provinces and the Laotian tributary states".⁵ There were two different units within the outer provinces: the major townships and the subordinate townships and territories.⁶ The major townships were classified into first, second and third class townships and these came under the control of the capital. They reported to either the Chief Minister of the *Mahatthai* (Civil Division) or the *Kalahom* (Military Division) or the *Khlang* (Treasury). The subordinate towns, on the other hand, came under the control of the major townships nearest to them. Chiefs of the subordinate towns,

like the chiefs of the major townships, were called the *Chao muang* (governor or master of the town). The duties of a town governor included the maintenance of peace and order. In the case of a town which was situated close to the sea or bordered another state, the governor had the additional duty of defending the town from external attacks.

The town governor was assisted in the administration of his town by a group of officials referred to as the *Krommakan*.⁷ The *Krommakan* comprised the *Palat* or the Deputy Governor, *Phon*, *Mahatthai* and the *Yokkrabat*. The *Phon* was a military commander who was responsible for the defence of the territory. The *Mahatthai* or the Civil Division issued important writs and maintained records. The *Yokkrabat* was a legal officer who, at the same time, collected intelligence on local politics for the central government. He kept the central government informed of the conduct of the officers of the *Krommakan*. In the event of a misconduct or abuse of power by the *Krommakan* officials, the *Yokkrabat* reported the matter to the town governor. He was, therefore, a spy for the central government.

In Ayutthayan times (1350-1767), all the officials of the *Krommakan* were appointed from the capital. The rest of the subordinate officials were appointed by the governor. Through a Royal Decree issued by Rama I in 1802, the appointment of all the provincial officials was placed under the jurisdiction of the three central ministries; the *Mahatthai*, *Kalahom*, and *Phrakhlang*.

The origins of the *Mahatthai* and *Kalahom* can be traced to the early period of Ayutthaya (1350-1569). During the reign of King Trailok (1448-1488), the people living around Ayutthaya were divided into two categories; the military and the civil. The office of the Head of the Military division was called the *Kalahom* and that of the Civil division, the *Mahatthai*. The Head or Chief of the *Mahatthai* was called the *Samuha Nayok* and the Chief of the *Kalahom*, the *Samuha Phra Kalahom*.⁸ There was however, no clear distinction between the military and civil departments in terms of their functions. Members of the *Kalahom* and *Mahatthai* both supported the King in local disputes or in wars against foreign powers. Eventually, the *Kalahom* came to have control over the southern provinces and the *Mahatthai*, the northern provinces.⁹

Another Department that also had authority over the regions was the *Phrakhlang*. The Department of *Phrakhlang*, whose Chief was also called the *Phrakhlang*, was entrusted with the duty of looking after a number of coastal provinces. Originally the *Phrakhlang* (the Chief) was in charge of the Royal Treasury. When the Thai King participated in foreign trade, the *Phrakhlang* was given charge of the royal cargoes. It was the responsibility of the *Phrakhlang* to ensure that the King's ships were loaded with trade items of high commercial value such as ivory and *sappanwood*.¹⁰

Two departments were placed under the *Phrakhlang*. These were the *Krom Tha* which was the Department of Port Authority and the *Krom Phra Khlang Sinkha*, the Department of the Royal Warehouse.¹¹ As a result of his role in Siam's royal trade, the *Phrakhlang* came to be in frequent contact with foreign merchants. Foreigners soon approached the *Phrakhlang* first when dealing with Siam in relation to trade. As such, the Department of the *Phrakhlang* began to assume the role of a Department of Foreign Affairs. Up to the late nineteenth century, the Department of the *Phrakhlang* was in fact both the Ministry of Treasury and Foreign Affairs.¹² Thus, the control and administration of all the provincial towns in the Kingdom of

Siam were divided among the three Ministries. The *Mahatthai*, *Kalahom* and *Phrakhlang* represented the central government.

Governors at the provincial level were chosen from among the more prominent members of the local society and they were usually military leaders or men of sound financial standing. The government issued writs of appointment or *sanyabat* to every newly appointed governor. When a governor was issued with a *sanyabat*, he was said to begin "to eat the town" or *kin muang* because "the idea is that the ruler gets his livelihood and wealth" from the people of the *muang* under his charge.¹³ This also meant that the governor and his officers in the provinces enjoyed a great deal of financial autonomy. They imposed taxes on the local population and on their produce as well. One part of the revenue derived from these taxes was shared among the officials, hence providing them with a livelihood. The remaining part was sent to the central government in Bangkok through the respective Ministries: the *Mahatthai*, *Kalahom* or the *Phrakhlang*.

RELATIONS BETWEEN THE CENTRAL ADMINISTRATION AND THE INNER AND OUTER PROVINCES

Provincial officers swore allegiance to the King in Bangkok twice a year in a ceremony called *phithi thu nam phi phat sataya* or "drinking of the water of allegiance". By partaking in this ceremony the provincial officials demonstrated their loyalty to the monarchy. The *phithi thu nam phi phat sataya* was considered to be one of the most important and ancient state ceremonies in Siam. It was associated closely with Buddhist-Brahmanistic rituals and served to maintain the established form of government in Siam. The rite took place in the Royal Temple in Bangkok and in one of the temples in each provincial capital. The water was blessed by Buddhist monks so as to purify it. On the day of the ceremony, a *Brahman* priest read out the oath and each official had to drink a small portion of the blessed water. The water which was placed in a small cup had to be consumed by the official to the last drop.¹⁴

The central government sent commissioners or *Khaluang* to the provinces when it deemed it necessary. The most common and frequent occasions were when the central government wanted to survey the potential revenue of a province or to levy corvée labour. On other occasions, the commissioners were sent to act against banditry in the provinces and to restore law and order. In times of war with rebelling provinces and with foreign countries, the provinces were obliged to send men to join the main army in Bangkok.

THE TRIBUTARY STATES

Distance from the capital distinguished the inner and outer provinces from that of the tributary states. For instance, travel between Bangkok and the northern tributary states using largely river transportation was arduous and took a long time. The inner and outer provinces were in regions which had easier access to Bangkok. The tributary states or otherwise referred to as *prathetsarat* (dependencies) were situated some distance further from Bangkok. The *prathetsarat* were not considered to be within the core of the Siamese Kingdom.

Tributary relations can be defined as that between states of unequal status. The patron state was the superior power while the tributary was usually the weaker. In mainland Southeast Asia, Siam and Burma were two rival regional super-powers. From about the sixteenth century to the eighteenth, both Siam and Burma had a number of tributary (vassal) states owing allegiance to either one or the other. During this time, Siam and Burma earnestly endeavored to wrest each other's vassal states. At the same time, Siam attempted to invade the Burmese Kingdom and Burma, in turn, launched numerous attacks on the Siamese territories with the intention of conquering the Kingdom of Ayutthaya (Siam).

Perhaps the best known of the Siamese defeats at the hands of the Burmese was the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767. Soon after the conquest, there emerged a Siamese general, Phya Taksin, who reconquered Ayutthaya from the Burmese. Following the conquest, Phya Taksin declared himself King and transferred his capital to Thonburi. Taksin asserted Siam's superiority over Burma by re-establishing the Ayutthayan tributary system. It was during this period, from the second half of the eighteenth century, that most of the northern states acknowledged Siamese overlordship.

Chiang Mai, Lampang, and Lamphun were among the first of the northern states which moved away from Burma. In 1774, all three states paid allegiance to Siam. In 1774 too, Luang Prabang became a tributary of Siam, followed by Vientiane and Bassac in 1778. However, Cambodia which was traditionally a tributary state of Siam stopped her tributary payments on the ground that the new King, Taksin, was "non-royal, a usurper, and half-Chinese".¹⁵ The recalcitrant Cambodia was attacked three times by Taksin before she resumed tributary payments to Siam. In 1782, Cambodia moved into the Thai orbit of influence. From then on, until 1867, Cambodia was, for the most part, in a tributary relationship with Bangkok. Meanwhile, the three northern states mentioned earlier were joined by another state in the north. Nan, located to the extreme east of Chiang Mai, shifted allegiance from Burma and became a vassal state of Siam in 1788.

In the south, Siam's tributary states included the Sultanates of Pattani, Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu. Siam's political expansion into the northern Malay States began from the end of the thirteenth century.¹⁶ It was during the Sukhotai period, under the leadership of King Ramkamhaeng (1277-1317), that Siam first made inroads into the Malay Peninsula.¹⁷ Siam's influence over the Malay states stopped briefly after the fall of Ayutthaya to the Burmese in 1767. During this time, the Malay vassal states broke away from Siamese hold and reaffirmed their independence. During the reign of King Taksin, followed by the reigns of Rama I and II, Bangkok reasserted her influence over the vassal states in the Malay Peninsula. During the reign of Rama III, not only were most of the Siamese vassal states reclaimed, two other new states on the eastern side of the Malay Peninsula became vassal states to Siam. These were Kelantan and Trengganu.

THE TRIBUTARY STATES: OBLIGATIONS

As an expression of their unequal relations and their submission to the more powerful centre, the tributary states were obliged to present gifts. These gifts took various forms. In the case of the Malay states, the presentation of the *bunga mas* and *perak* or the ornamental gold and silver tree was the most common form of tribute offering.

The offering of the ornamental gold and silver tree was not a tradition that was exclusively peculiar to the southern tributary states of Siam. The sending of the gold and silver tree or any other gift of value was a traditional instrument of statecraft used to maintain regional balance of power among nations such as Burma, Siam and Vietnam. Many other smaller states in the region sought Siamese patronage and offered gifts to Siam voluntarily and these were acknowledged as offerings from a vassal state to a suzerain. In some instances, the tributary payment from a vassal state to a suzerain was not voluntary, but was made under coercion. For example, Cambodia was a Siamese vassal state which was attacked and forced to submit her tributary payment to Siam.

In the case of the northern Malay tributary states, the *bunga mas dan perak* was not necessarily indicative of a relations of unequal status with the Siamese state, rather it was viewed as *tanda sepakat dan persahabatan* (friendship and alliance). However, the Siamese state tended to view the offering as a gift from a vassal state to a suzerain ruler and therefore obligatory upon the vassal (tributary) state. This difference in perspective led in later years to mutual distrust between the suzerain and the Malay states and in some instances military actions by the suzerain.¹⁸

Apart from the ornamental gold and silver tree, some of the other tributary states offered forest products of commercial value. These included wood, beeswax, birds' nest and gum benjamin. Cambodia's most valued tributary product was cardamom.¹⁹ From the northern states, Siam obtained wood, lacquer, hides, horns and benzoin. Birds' nest, a prized item in the Sino-Siamese junk trade, was procured mostly from the island of Phuket (Junk Ceylon or Thalang) in the south.

Siam's tributaries to the south tended to be less consistent in their show of allegiance; they were prone to break away from Siamese suzerainty when they did not require Siamese protection. This difference between the northern and southern tributary states was due largely to the differences in language, ethnicity, culture and religion.

Siam's tributaries to the north had closer cultural, language, ethnic and religious affinities with Siam. They belonged to the same race, the Tai, whose original homeland was in southern China. They were followers of Theravada Buddhism which in itself promoted a common religio-political culture.²⁰ Theravada Buddhism had introduced to the Thais the idea that the monarch at the centre was a Buddhist *dharmaraja* and his righteous rule determined the well-being of the state. As such, the people paid greater reverence to his rule. The northerners and Thais in the central also spoke a language which was from the same linguistic family. Although these affinities cannot be taken to mean that there was no political tension between the north and centre, they, nevertheless, contributed to a more harmonious political understanding between the two.

There were further differences between the northern and southern tributaries. One of the most significant was the participation in Siamese state ceremonies. Chiefs of the Malay states generally sent representatives to attend state ceremonies while the northern rulers, more often than not, appeared in person. These state ceremonies included royal weddings, funerals and investitures or ordinations.

The north and the central government also had link through marriages. It was a common practice in the past for northern royal families to offer their daughters to the Siamese King in marriage. In addition, it was more common for the sons of the northern chiefs to be sent to Bangkok for their formal education.²¹

All these factors created a closer bond between the northern vassal states and the central government.

The ethnic and cultural differences between Siam and the Malay states were, of course, accentuated by the conversion of the Malay states to Islam by probably the fifteenth century after which the Malay states viewed most of Siam's beliefs and rituals as un-Islamic. The *prathetsarat* were given autonomy in their internal affairs. Succession to the rulership was hereditary, and they were allowed to continue observing their own customs, religion and way of life. As long as the *prathetsarat* acknowledged Siamese suzerainty or overlordship, there was no interference in their internal affairs. The *prathetsarat* were expected to submit their tribute offerings, the ornamental gold and silver trees for instance, at scheduled times. These were made at regular intervals which could vary from one to three years.

The payment of tribute was compulsory. A delay in payment had to be explained immediately to the suzerain.²² The *prathetsarat* also accepted other responsibilities. This included providing men to the capital when the need arose or when requested by the suzerain. They also provided military supplies, labor for public works and occasionally, food for the army. For instance, in 1853, King Mongkut instructed the chief of Nan, a northern tributary of Siam, to send a force of men to Sipsong Panna and Chiang Rung. They were expected to join a large army, consisting of forces from Phrae, Lampang, Lamphun and Chiang Mai, to attack and occupy Kengtung.²³ A similar demand was made by Rama III in order to quell the Chao Anu Rebellion in Vientiane in 1826/27.²⁴

The chiefs of the vassal states always acted with great care so as not to offend the patron. In 1821, Chao Sumon Thewarat, Chief of Nan, received a delegation from the rulers of Sipsong Panna and Chiang Rung. The chiefs of Sipsong Panna and Chiang Rung wanted to purchase six male elephants which they hoped to present as gifts to the new King of Ava. Chao Sumon Thewarat did not comply with the request immediately. Instead, he wrote to and consulted the King of Siam over the matter. Only after the King had granted permission, because Ava was then on friendly terms with Siam, was it considered proper for Chao Sumon Thewarat to proceed with the request.²⁵

It was obligatory for a *prathetsarat* to send white elephants, if found in their territories, to the suzerain ruler in the capital.²⁶ An article in the Treaty between Siam and Cambodia which referred to the white elephants clearly indicated this point. It said:

...should [the Cambodian authorities] meet with any white ones, either males or females, or with any curiously colored ones, with the complete and requisite number of toes or nails, the Cambodian authorities will not conceal the facts, but send a communication with such elephants to be presented to His Majesty after the custom of the other tributary States of Siam.²⁷

In sum, the tributary-state relations served two purposes for the suzerain. One, it was a practical and inexpensive way of obtaining goods of economic value from the *prathetsarat*. Two, it was an effective way to maintain security along Siam's extensive frontiers.²⁸ The tributary states were used to help in the defense of the Kingdom, particularly its frontier states. There were many advantages that the

prathetsarat enjoyed as a result of its relations with the suzerain ruler. A closer look at the functions of the suzerain ruler vis-à-vis the tributary states will explain these advantages.

THE SUZERAIN

A suzerain ruler was obliged to extend protection to the *prathetsarat* against all internal and external threats. It was customary for the suzerain to provide military assistance to the tributary states when the need arose or if requests were made.

Article (I) of the Treaty between Cambodia and Siam referred to the provision of Siamese assistance should “the Cambodian noble or the inhabitants rebel and collect forces to oppose the ruler of the country”. In such a situation, “an army in the charge of a Royal Commissioner will be sent to quell the disturbances and restore the country to tranquility”.²⁹

It was also Bangkok, as the suzerain, that formalized the appointment of a Chief to the throne of a tributary state. When the appointment was recognized, the regalia to rule was formally sent from the King of Siam in Bangkok. This was the case at least in Cambodia³⁰ and in the northern states of Siam. The appointment of Sumon Thewarat as Chief of the northern Siamese province of Nan in 1811 illustrates this point. After the formal notification of his appointment, Sumon Thewarat called on the King in Bangkok, where the King presented him with the regalia of a ruling prince.³¹ The regalia consisted of a golden betel nut chewing set, a golden goblet and cups, a golden spittoon, umbrella and guns.³²

The northern Malay States, however, stopped receiving from Siam the insignia to rule after the rulers of these states embraced Islam. It is relevant to note that the Malay states, prior to their conversion, received traditional Malay insignia from the Siamese monarch. The Malay insignia, according to Walter F. Vella, was different from that given to the Siamese states and officials. The Malay insignia comprised robes and various kinds of utensils.³³ The insignia apart, there was no distinction in the titles conferred on the Malay and Thai vassal states. Both Malay and Thai vassal states received Siamese title. Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin Halim Shah of Kedah and the Governor of Nakhon Sithammarat (before the Siamese attack on Kedah in 1821), both held the title of *Chao Phraya*.³⁴

The sovereign ruler also bestowed titles and honours or presented gifts to the rulers of the *prathetsarat* when the latter presented the sovereign with gifts and in particular white elephants. In 1816, the Chief of Nan, Sumon Thewarat, offered a white elephant which was captured at Muang Ngam to the King in Bangkok. The King presented cash to the Chief, amounting to two *chang* (about 160 baht), and other fine gifts.³⁵

Unlike the suzerain ruler who benefited both politically and economically from the state-tributary relations, the tributary states stood mostly to gain from a political-military point of view.

Economic demands made by the suzerain on the tributary states became increasingly burdensome especially when appointed tax collectors and, in later years, the *Chao pasi cjin* (Chinese tax farmers) who were responsible for tax collection, were oppressive. These people exacted from the local populace more than was stipulated and, in some cases, siphoned off a substantial amount of the taxes collected to their private funds while the state treasury remained poor. The nature

of the state-tributary relations, from an economic point of view, can be better understood by referring to the economy of the Kingdom of Siam in the nineteenth century as well as the traditional system of revenue collection and the importance of trade.

THE ECONOMY

Agriculture and trade were the predominant economic activities in Siam during the first half of the nineteenth century. Agriculture for the most part consisted of the cultivation of rice and the gathering of forest products by the *phrai* (commoners). The *phrai* cultivated crops and gathered forest products mainly for their own consumption and for the payment of tax and purchase of essentials. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, agriculture remained the most important sector in the economy of Siam. Production grew to meet the increasing demand from foreign traders.

Overseas trade, on the other hand, was a court or royal monopoly. Only the King and his noblemen engaged in Siam's trade with foreign countries. Three factors appear to favor the King and the nobility. One, the King and the nobility received the right to purchase first (royal pre-emptive rights)³⁶. And, what they did not want was afterwards sold to the public or other private traders. Two, the King and the noblemen could purchase goods from the producers at rates lower than market prices or at rates fixed by the court. Three, the King and nobility traded goods which they received as gifts and taxes from the *phrai*.³⁷ In this way, the court had control over the supply of goods and the revenue from the sale of these goods.

Apart from the royal class merchants, there were also a few merchants of non-nobility background. These groups of merchants engaged in trade as a privilege from the royal household. Non-nobility merchants comprised mostly foreigners like Chinese and Europeans. Some of these traders represented the Siamese King on trade trips abroad. The non-nobility traders were persons who were favored in the Siamese court circle for various reasons. One such person was Robert Hunter, an Englishman and a trader in Siam during the reign of Rama III. Hunter held the title of *Luang Vises Bani*³⁸ principally for his gift of muskets, an important item of military value sought by the Siamese court.³⁹

Beginning from the second half of the nineteenth century, Siam's external trade which was hitherto a court monopoly and one which was largely conducted with China expanded to include Western nations in a new unrestricted trade policy.

TRADITIONAL REVENUE COLLECTION

In the early part of the nineteenth century, the Thai state derived its revenue mostly from *suai* (payment in kind), land tax, Chinese poll tax, and profit from trade.

Suai was an indirect system of taxation on the *phrai* (commoners). There were different obligations and functions required of the *phrai* towards the King and the state. The most important of the obligations was corvee labour. As a rule, all *phrai* could be called up by the government for labour without any payment. Corvee was practiced in Siam since the Ayutthayan period. During the reign of King Taksin (1767-1782), the mobilization of labour was further regulated. The Royal Decree of 1774 required that every *phrai* be tattooed with the name of their *munnai* (master/

patron) and the name of the town in which the *phrai* resided.⁴⁰ The servant class for example were tattooed on their wrists.⁴¹

There were two categories of labour in Siam in the latter half of the nineteenth century. These were the *phrai luang* and the *phrai som*. The *phrai luang* were men assigned to work for the King for three months in a year. The second category called the *phrai som* served the King for a month and the noblemen for the remaining two months.⁴²

The *phrai luang* served the King in the *ratchakan* (state affairs). The *phrai luang* were men who were conscripted to carry out the bulk of the state's construction work. Construction work conducted by the *phrai luang* met the needs of both the royal household and the general public. These included the building of royal palaces, *wats* (temples), *stupas* (shrines), cities, forts and irrigation works.⁴³ The King placed the *phrai luang* under the control of nobles. These nobles became masters or *nai* to the *phrai luang*.

The *phrai som* were men working in the prince's service. A *phrai som's* duties ranged from guarding the palace of the prince to serving as a messenger for the prince as well as accompanying the prince in his travels.⁴⁴ If the prince was involved in a war or local conflict, the *phrai som* were called upon for military services under the command of the prince.

The *phrai suai*, however, were *phrai* who were exempted from corvee. They were required to pay *suai* (payment in kind) in lieu of corvee. The *suai* payments were made to the *Chao* (ruling class) and the King. Rice, sandalwood, sappanwood, beeswax, hides, horns, ivory, betel nut and other native products were among the items offered as *suai*. Alternatively, when the *phrai suai* could not fulfill their quota of the *suai* obligations in goods, *suai* could be paid in cash. *Suai* in currency was paid in *ngoen* (silver money) and *thong* (gold). *Nai Kong* who were the masters or patrons to the *phrai* at the provincial (*kong*) level, collected the *suai* and handed it to local official who were either the *Chao muang* (provincial ruler), *Palat* (deputy governor) or the *Yokrabat* (Legal Officer or Judge).

In Siam, the corvee system was not merely a system of exacting labor services from the people. It was also part of "an elaborate scheme of taxation".⁴⁵ Through this scheme the government received services and goods from the people in a regular manner. People who performed corvee provided services for the benefit of the government. Those who wanted to be exempted from corvee paid taxes in cash and goods. Both ways the government earned its revenue through a regular supply of goods and services.⁴⁶

There were other forms of revenue that the state collected. These were the land tax, poll tax, taxes on export and imports and revenue from tax farms.⁴⁷ The land tax was collected on rice land. Land tax was collected by local officials from the *Krom Na* (Department of Land) and, as such, it was a direct form of taxation unlike the collection of *suai*. This was because the *krom* was a central administrative unit while the *kong* was a provincial unit. Officials from the *Krom Na*, however, often failed to distinguish between private and state funds. Monies from the land tax were often regarded as their personal property and, therefore, did not reach the central Treasury.⁴⁸

When the demand for rice increased in the 1850's, King Mongkut was reported to have reduced the land tax on rice land. This measure was intended as an incentive to rice farmers to clear and cultivate new lands. Land tax on newly cultivated land was waived for the first few years.⁴⁹ Between 1857 and 1905, taxes

on rice land were kept relatively low. They ranged from 0.125 to 0.375 baht per *rai*⁵⁰. Furthermore, land tax was collected only in the central and northern regions of Siam. The northeast or Isan was exempted from land tax.⁵¹

The poll tax was a head tax imposed on the Chinese residing in Siam. As the Chinese were exempted from *suai* payments and corvee obligations, the poll tax served as the only form of taxation that the Chinese were subjected to. The poll tax was collected by *krom* (central) officials. The collection of the tax was made once every three years. Some accounts state that the tax was collected annually. The amount of poll tax imposed on the Chinese varied between 1.5 baht and 4.5 baht. For instance, the poll tax on Chinese during the reign of Rama II was 1.5 ticals, payable once every three years.⁵² Crawford gave the figure of 2 ticals payable to the government and 1.5 fuang to the collector of the poll tax.⁵³ Burney, in his account, stated that 4.5 baht was collected from every Chinese resident tri-annually.⁵⁴

Taxes on imports and exports were another source of revenue to the state. But the amount collected from import duties dwindled in the years following the Bowring Treaty of 1855. This was to a great extent due to the 3% tax fixed on imports. In other words, prior to 1855, the Siamese King levied charges arbitrarily on the western merchants, whereas, in the years following the Bowring Treaty, this charge was fixed at 3 per cent. Hence, the effect of the Treaty was to reduce the revenue obtained by the King from this quarter.⁵⁵

The *suai* in goods from the *phrai* constituted a major proportion of the merchandise with which the Siamese court traded with China.⁵⁶ In fact, it was said that the Thai King and nobility engaged in the state trade of Siam for "the purpose of selling the goods they collected in taxes or from services owed".⁵⁷ Thus, the collection of *suai* was an important source of revenue to the Siamese Kingdom. Essentially, *suai* provided the court with the supply of goods which were traded with China in the Sino-Siamese junk trade. *Suai* collected from the people of the northern tributary states was subsequently offered by the *Chao prathetsarat* (ruler of a dependency) along with other gifts and tribute to the monarch in Bangkok. These items also constituted part of the merchandise in the junk trade between Siam and China.

THE BOWRING TREATY (1855) AND EXPANSION OF INTERNATIONAL COMMODITY TRADE

In 1851, King Mongkut (Rama IV) ascended the throne upon the death of his half brother King Rama III. By then, Mongkut had spent twenty seven years in the Buddhist monkhood. During this time Mongkut studied English from Jesse Caswell, an American missionary in Bangkok.⁵⁸ Mongkut's education, mostly self-taught, encompassed various fields. He excelled in Pali which was the language of the *Buddhist Tripitaka* (scriptures) and studied astronomy, geography, as well as science. Mongkut's knowledge of the English language better prepared him to deal with foreigners. He was fully aware of the need to foster commercial and diplomatic relations with foreign nations as a means to prevent western expansion into Siam. British annexation of the Burmese territories, Arakan and Tenasserim in 1826, alerted him to the need for a radical change in Siamese foreign policy.⁵⁹

As is now quite well-known, four years after the ascension of Mongkut, Siam opened her door to free trade. In 1855, John Bowring, a British government representative, succeeded in negotiating a treaty of friendship and commerce with Siam. The signing of the Treaty between King Mongkut and Bowring – aimed at encouraging, facilitating, and regulating the trade and industry between Britain and Siam-helped to promote the expansion of international trade in Siam.⁶⁰

As a result of the Bowring Treaty, almost all restrictions on imports and exports, previously imposed by the Siamese state, were removed. Import duties were fixed at 3 per cent while export duties (various rates) were specified on all export items. British and subsequently other European, traders had access to all seaports in the Kingdom.

There were also other factors which contributed to the expansion of international trade. The most important was the introduction of steamships as a more effective form of ocean transport. Whereas, in 1880, a total of 349 sailing ships and 182 steamships entered the port of Bangkok, in 1898, the number of sailing and steamships which called at the port of Bangkok were 7 and 511 respectively.⁶¹

Ocean transportation in Siam in the nineteenth century went through a steady period of transition: first from junks to square-rigged vessels and, subsequently, to steamships. Similarly, the economy of Siam changed from one which produced a wide range of products in the early part of the nineteenth century to an economy which concentrated on the output of a few export commodities namely rice, tin, teak and, at the beginning of the twentieth century, rubber. This was especially so after the Free Trade Treaty of 1855.

However, the economy of Siam was more varied, prior to the Treaty of 1855. Siamese exports included sugar, pepper, salted fish and a variety of jungle produce. The volume and extent of trade was relatively small but its export composition was not determined by the specific commodities that were highly in demand in the international market.

Throughout the period 1900 to 1945, rice, tin, teak and rubber accounted for almost 80 to 90 per cent in value of Siam's total exports.⁶² In short, the economy of Siam during this period became highly dependent on these commodities.

Rice was Siam's most important export item in the 1850's. For the rest of the nineteenth century, it remained Siam's top export earner. Large quantities of rice were shipped to the ports of Hong Kong and Singapore for further transshipment to Britain's other colonies in Asia. These colonies included Penang and the Malay states. The demand for rice from the British colonial government stemmed largely from the need to feed the growing immigrant labourers employed there.

Rice formed two-thirds of Siam's total exports well into the 1990's. During the same period, there was a sharp increase in the acreage of paddy land, indicating the importance of rice as a commercial crop. In 1850, 6 million *rai* (about 2.4 million acres) were planted with the rice. Between 1905 and 1906, the figure rose to 9 million *rai*. Although tin, teak and rubber emerged to take over as the major export items in the 1900's, rice continued to be Siam's staple export during this period. The dominance of rice as Siam's top export earner arose in part from the fact that 90% of crop land was allocated to the cultivation of rice. This was the case for almost a century after the 1980's.⁶³ A majority of the local people cultivated rice and provided the land and labor for rice farming. Rice traders and middlemen were mostly Chinese.

Tin was mined extensively in the late nineteenth century in the southern part of Siam. The island of Phuket and the provinces of Phangnga, Takuapa and Ranong on the west coast of the Peninsula, produced more than half of Siam's tin output⁶⁴ while Nakhon Sithammarat and Pattani on the east coast contributed a smaller amount annually. Large scale tin extraction, beginning from the late nineteenth century, had a few distinct characteristics which remained unchanged for a long time. Firstly, it was labour intensive. Secondly, the mining industry employed a huge number of Chinese coolies of the Hokkien speech group. Thirdly, the industry was concentrated around Phuket and adjacent tin-rich areas on the west coast. Fourthly, the mining industry in Siam relied on capital investments from wealthy Chinese and Siamese nobles.

Tin was an important export item in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Between 1871 and 1900, it accounted for 7 to 15 per cent in value of Siam's total exports.⁶⁵ Between 1901 and 1905, it accounted for 8% of total exports and between 1906 and 1910, it rose to 9 % of the total exports.⁶⁶

The change to commodity trade determined by the global market forced Siam to adopt a more effective method to administer its economy and finance. This in turn directly affected the traditional economy and revenue system; the *suai*/tributary system was neither compatible nor sufficient for the demands of the international market. The weaknesses in the traditional administrative and revenue collection mechanism and the increasing "fear" of western imperialist incursions into Siamese territories prompted the Siamese King and his men to embark on a wide ranging reform programme. This programme referred as the *thesaphiban* reforms led eventually to the end of the tributary system and in its place the introduction of a more bureaucratized "modern" administration.

CONCLUSION

The picture that emerges from this discussion of Siam in the nineteenth century is one of a Kingdom which covered a large area and had a traditionally "loose" administrative and financial machinery, most of which can be traced back to the "glorious" days of Ayutthaya. But, developments on the international front, by the mid-nineteenth century, such as the expansion of western maritime powers to this region and with it, the threat of colonization by western powers, soon forced Siam to review the "Ayutthayan-style" administrative structure, in order to meet the demands of a new age, that of western imperialism. Thus, by 1910, Siam became very different from what it was in 1860s. From about the mid-1870s, Bangkok introduced major administrative reforms throughout the country, which included the core region, the provinces and the northern and southern tributary states.

Perhaps, the most observable administrative change, and admittedly the one that required Bangkok to employ its outmost tact was, first the extension of its political control to the "autonomous-five" (the five northern tributary states) as well as the southern "khaek" (Malay) tributary states and second, the incorporation of these states into Siam proper. By the second half of the nineteenth century, the northern and southern tributary states received unprecedented attention from both the western powers and Bangkok itself. Northern Siam's large teak forest and the tin-rich provinces of southern Siam drew the attention of the western powers, British in particular. Meanwhile the problem and threat to Siam's northern and

southern frontier, as a result of this attention, forced Bangkok to assume political control of these states.

In conclusion, the suzerain-tributary relation was one which was mutually beneficial. Both parties enjoyed gains, while at the same time there were obligations that both had to fulfill. The suzerain (or state) stood to gain mostly from an economic point of view whereas the vassal states benefited more in terms of political security.

While in place, the suzerain-tributary system was an effective and beneficial administrative mechanism. It maintained the status quo between the ruler and the ruled, operating within the patronage–clientage framework common in all Southeast Asian society and politics. It was only with the increasing presence of western powers in the region, that Siam- the suzerain- began to monitor more closely the activities of the local *prathetsarat* rulers and introduced policies that began to seriously encroach into the internal affairs of the *prathetsarat* which included finance and diplomatic matters.

The extension of Bangkok's total control over the northern and southern *prathetsarat* states through the policy of centralization was gradual, covering a period of more than half a century (c. late 19th to mid 20th century). During this time, Bangkok faced numerous challenges in the process of consolidating its hold over the frontier territories, in particular the objection and resistance from the traditional ruling and religious elites of the tributary states. The eventual incorporation of the frontier states into the Siamese kingdom proper ended the former tributary-vassal administrative system and marked the beginning of a new chapter in Thai administrative history.

ENDNOTES

¹ Tej Bunnag, *The Provincial Administration Of Siam, 1892-1915: The Ministry of the Interior under Prince Damrong Rajanubhab*, Kuala Lumpur : Oxford University Press, 1977, p.17.

The *Bangkok Calendar*, however, reports that the states were denominated: interior or inner, central and outer. According to the article, the interior belong to "Siam proper", while the outer were "simply tributary states". See *Bangkok Calendar*, 1868, p.74.

² Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian, *Thai-Malay Relations: Traditional Intra-regional Relations from the Seventeenth to the Early Twentieth Centuries*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1998, p.37.

³ Dhani Nivat, "The Old Siamese Conception Of The Monarchy", in *Journal of Siam Society* (JSS), Vol. 36, Pt. 2, 1946/47, p.95.

⁴ Akin Rabibhadana, *The Organization of Thai Society in the Early Bangkok Period 1782-1873*, Data Paper No. 74, Ithaca, New York: Southeast Asia Program, Department of Asian Studies, Cornell University, 1969, p.69.

⁵ Tej Bunnag, *The Provincial Administration of Siam*, p.17.

⁶ Akin Rabibhadana, *The Organization of Thai Society*, p.69.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.75.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.66.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.28.

- ¹⁰ Ian Brown, *The Creation of the Modern Ministry of Finance in Siam, 1885-1910*, London: Macmillan, 1992, p.6.
- ¹¹ Akin Rabibhadana, *The Organization of Thai Society*, p.67.
- ¹² In October 1980, the Ministry of Finance was formally established to monitor all of Siam's financial affairs.
- ¹³ *Bangkok Calendar*, 1868, p.76.
See also, Tej Bunnag, *The Provincial Administration of Siam*, p.22.
- ¹⁴ For details see, H.G Quaritch Wales, *Siamese State Ceremonies, Their History and Function*, London: Bernard Quaritch, 1931, pp.193-198.
- ¹⁵ David P. Chandler, "Cambodia's Relations with Siam in the Early Bangkok Period: The Politics of a Tributary State", in *JSS*, Vol.60, Pt.1, 1972, p.156.
- ¹⁶ Walter F. Vella. *Siam Under Rama III, 1824-1851*, New York: JJ. Augustin Incorporated, 1957, p.59.
- ¹⁷ Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian, *Thai-Malay Relations*, p.3.
- ¹⁸ See Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian, *Thai-Malay Relations*, pp. 56-57. On the Kedah viewpoint of the gold and silver tree as a free-will and complimentary offering to Siam, see R.Bonney, *Kedah, 1771-1821: The Search for Security and Independence*, p.12.
- ¹⁹ David P. Chandler, "Cambodia's Relations with Siam", p.154.
- ²⁰ Kobkua Suwanathat-Pian, *Thai-Malay Relations*, p.41.
- ²¹ Walter F. Vella, *Siam Under Rama III*, pp.78-79.
- ²² NA.R.5.T.6.1/3, Treaty between Siam and Cambodia, relative to Commerce, Extradition, Succession, and Tribute. 1 Dec, 1863 (sgnd), in the *State Papers: Kingdom of Siam 1664-1886*, London:William Ridgway, 1886, p.26.
- ²³ Prasoet Churatana (trans), D.K.Wyatt (ed.), *The Nan Chronicle*, Data Paper 59, Ithaca, New York: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1966, p.74.
- ²⁴ A French source stated that each one of the chiefs (*les souverains*) of Lamphun, Chiang Mai and Lampang sent the princes of their families to put themselves at the disposition of royal service against the army of Vientiane (Vieng Chan). See, Camille Notton, *Annales Du Siam: Chronique de Xieng Mai*, Vol. 3, Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1932, p.254.
- ²⁵ Prasoet Churatana (trans), *The Nan Chrocnicle*, p.67.
- ²⁶ Siam's ruler was not the only sovereign who requested elephants from his vassal states. When King Alaungpaya of Burma occupied Siam, he wrote to the King of Siam and requested to be presented with a daughter and some elephants. See G.E. Harvey, *History of Burma : From the Earliest Times to March 1824, The Beginning of the English Conquest*, London : Frank Cass & Co, 1967, p.241.
- ²⁷ NA, R.5.T.6.1/3, Treaty between Siam and Cambodia, p.27.
- ²⁸ David P. Chandler, "Cambodia's Relations with Siam", p.154.
- ²⁹ NA, R.5.T.6.1/3, Treaty between Siam and Cambodia, p.24.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.25. See Article (VII) of the Treaty.
- ³¹ Prasoet Churatana (trans), *The Nan Chronicle*, p.61
- ³² *Ibid.*
- ³³ Walter F. Vella, *Siam Under Rama III*, p.60. See also, Footnote (6) on the same page.

³⁴ R. Bonney, *Kedah, 1771-1821*, p.163.

³⁵ Prasoet Churatana (trans), *The Nan Chronicle*, p.62

³⁶ Ammar Siamwalla, "Kan karawang prathet kab rabob sethakit pay nai prathet (B.E.2363-2398) [Foreign Trade and Domestic Economy in Siam (1820-1855)]", in Chatthip Nartsupha and Sompop Manarungsan (ed), *Prawatsat Sekthakit Thai jon teng B.E.2484* [The History of Thai Economy until A.D 1941], Bangkok : Samnakpiem Mahawityalai Thammasat, 1984, p.149.

³⁷ Johd Crawfurd, *Journal of an Embassy To The Courts of Siam and Cochin China*, Oxford in Asia Historical Reprints, Kuala Lumpur : Oxford University Press, 1967, p.380.

³⁸ Damrong Rajanubhab, "The Introduction of Western Culture in Siam", in *JSS*, Vol. 20, Pt.2, 1926, p.95. Hunter was also responsible for introducing the first steamship to Siam in 1843. See W.Nunn, "Some Notes Upon the Development of the Commerce of Siam", in *JSS*, Vol. 15, Pt.2 , 1922, p.100.

³⁹ Adey Moore, "An Early British Merchant in Bangkok", in *Selected Article from the Journal of Siam Society*, Vol. 8, Bangkok, 1959, p.245.

⁴⁰ Akin Rabibhadana, *The Organization of Thai Society*, p.57. This does not mean that the tradition of tattooing was introduced during the reign of Taksin. In his account, Simon de la Laubere indicated that tattooing was practiced during the reign of King Narai (1656-1688) of Ayutthaya. See Simon de la Loubere, *Kingdom of Siam*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1968 (reprint), p.78.

⁴¹ B.J. Terwiel, "Tattooing In Thailand's History", paper presented at the Seventh Conference of the International Association of the Historians of Asia, Bangkok, 1977.

⁴² Chatthip Nartsupha and Suthy Prasartsets (eds), *The Political Economy of Siam 1851-1910*, Bangkok : The Social Association of Thailand, 1981, p.27.

⁴³ Akin Rabibhadana, *The Organization of Thai Society*, p.33.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ B. Terwiel, "Bondage and Slavery in Early Nineteenth Century Siam" in Anthony Reid (ed), *Slavery, Bondage and Dependency in Southeast Asia*, St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1983, p.126.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.127.

⁴⁷ Constance M. Wilson, "Revenue Farming, Economic Development and Government Policy during the Early Bangkok Period, 1830-92," in John Butcher and Howard Dick (eds), *The Rise and Fall of Revenue Farming*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993, p.147.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ James Ingram, "Thailand's Rice Trade and the Allocations of Resources", in C.D. Cowan (ed.), *The Economic Development of South East Asia*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1964, p.110.

⁵⁰ Constance Wilson, "Revenue Farming, Economic Development and Government Policy", p.147.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² H.G. Quaritch Wales, *Ancient Siamese Government and Administration*, New York: Paragon Book Reprint Corp., 1965, p.201.

⁵³ John Crawfurd, *Journal of Embassy To The Courts of Siam and Cochin China*, p.386.

⁵⁴ *The Burney Papers*, Vol. 2, Part 4, Vajirayana Library, Bangkok, 1910-1914 (reprint), p.80. Burney refers to the poll tax as capitation tax charged on every adult Chinese resident.

⁵⁵ Lysa Hong, *Thailand in the Nineteenth Century : Evolution of the Economy and Society*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1984, p.82.

⁵⁶ B. Terwiel, "Bondage and Slavery in Early Nineteenth Century Siam", p.127.

⁵⁷ Jennifer W. Cushman, *Fields From The Sea: Chinese Junk Trade with Siam During The Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries*, Ithaca, New York: South East Asia Program, Cornell University, 1993, p. 3.

⁵⁸ William L. Bradley, "Prince Mongkut and Jesse Caswell" in *JSS*, Vol. 54, Pt. 1, 1966, pp.29-41.

⁵⁹ NA, Public Office Record, P.O/59, (copied from) F.O.97/368, "British Assessment of King Mongkut's overtures to friendship with government of Britain and potential for British influence in the region". A passage from the correspondence refers to the annexation of Arakan and Tenasserim and how it has "left the Burmese a sea coast almost exclusively confined to the mouths of the Irrawaddy". In the following paragraph, the writer (obviously a British), reminded Siam on the impending threat of a Burmese attack on Siam. The passage reads:

"Should circumstances render it desirable or compulsory to deprive the Burman empire of their remaining coast line, their attention will be naturally turned to the acquisition of an outlet in the Gulph [sic] of Siam, either across the Siamese territories, or through the Tenasserim provinces".

⁶⁰ Sompop Manarungsan, *Economic Development of Thailand, 1850-1950: Response to the Challenge of the World Economy*, Bangkok: Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 1989, p.13.

⁶¹ BCR (Siam), 1880 (p.4) and 1898 (p.14).

⁶² Sompop Manarungsan, *Economic Development of Thailand*, p.160.

⁶³ James Ingram, "Thailand's Rice Trade and the Allocation of Resources", p.109.

⁶⁴ John H. Heal, "Mines and Mining Administration", in Chatthip Nartsupha and Suthy Prasartset (eds), *The Political Economy of Siam, 1851-1910*, p.206. Heal served as the Inspector General of the Siamese Royal Department of Mines for a period of time. The Department was established in 1891 under the Ministry of Agriculture.

⁶⁵ Sompop Manarungsan, *Economic Development of Thailand*, p.160.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.161. (Figures derived from Table 6.1 : Exports of Thailand, 1860-1950).