

A Short History of the Long Memory of the Thai Nation
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I. The 1880s-1900s was one of the most critical periods in the entire history of Siam when it faced the serious threat from the European colonial powers. In the eyes of the ruling elite, the country was not colonized because the Thai monarchs undertook the self-civilizing process modernizing the Thai state and society until it earned recognition from the civilized world, and because the great leaders made necessary sacrifices of some territories to preserve the country's independence. Every Thai, regardless of their educational background, knows the first axiom of Thai history -- that is, thanks to the great leadership of the Chakri monarchs, Siam was never colonized by the Westerners.

As a matter of fact, it was not simply a history of the Big Bad Wolf versus the Helpless Lamb. The conflict was not an anti-colonial one as it pretends, nor was Siam an innocent victim. Siam fought the French to protect its aged old imperial supremacy over Laos, Cambodia and parts in the peninsula. It was an uncontestable contest of an old empire of the region versus a global colonial power for the supremacy over the region. The culmination was Franco-Siamese conflict in 1893 in which the outcome was decided when two French gunships pointing their weapons to the Grand Palace in Bangkok. The territorial "sacrifices" were the traditional vassals whose people never considered themselves parts of Siam. In case of Laos, its later historiography even thanks the French for liberating it from Siam.

Then, Siam was saved from colonization by several factors. The most important one was probably the agreement between the two superpowers of the time, Britain and France, to guarantee Siam's sovereignty in order to make it the buffer between their major colonies (British India/Burma and Indochina respectively). These had nothing to do with the brilliant Thai monarchs and their self-civilizing mission, but to geo-politics and the timing that Siam became an issue after its neighbors were already colonized. Siam was not colonized because in the superpowers' plan, it was not supposed to.

On the other hand, Siam could not escaped from the colonial economy. In fact it was gradually integrated to the colonial economy and its division of labor since the mid-19th c. as it brought mutual benefits to both the Thai elite and the Europeans. The modernization of the Thai state and society by the Thai elite themselves in many respects also brought Siam into fold of the global systems. Extraterritoriality in particular forced Siam to transform its entire legal system to meet the standards set by Western countries. Territorial administration, mapping, the functionalized bureaucracy were fundamental changes to fit the global systems. Many parts of the transformation were under the strong influence of the ideas and models from the West or even took place under the supervision of the Europeans employed by the Siamese government. Siam was not colonized, because it was not needed.

In short, Siam was independent in the sense that it was not formally or directly colonized. But it was responsive to colonial economy and performed a necessary function for the colonial system in the region without having to be colonized. This peculiar condition and

its consequences have not been adequately examined. A semi-colony normally refers to the condition of partial colonization. In this case, it is a crypto-colonial condition -- a colonial situation that did not appear so, or even claims independence as its virtuous legacy. Siam as a crypto-colony bore some peculiar characteristics that also shape its nationalism.

First of all, while the reform faced a resistance from the conservatives within the ruling class, and from some local powers that were suppressed by the new territorial rule, the state faced no serious challenge for an alternative or a different direction of transformation. Let alone the destruction of the ancien regime. Nor were other fundamental institutions of the old regime, such as Buddhism and the sangha, radically challenged for change. Let alone a religious revolution. Instead, the major transformations in the name of reform, modernization, and civilization (considered “revolution” by some Thai historians) were initiated and undertaken by the ruling people within those institutions. The old regime were in charge of major “reforms”, for example, the absolute monarchy created the modern state and bureaucracy, the “reformed” Buddhist sangha was in charge of the foundation of modern education.

The conventional history suggests that the self-civilizing process was the monarchs’ visions to save the country’s independence by earning recognition from the European powers. This is only partly true. Becoming civilized was a self-serving desire of the Thai royal elite to earn recognition of themselves among the world’s elites. While the Thai elite believed that they were successful, thus the country was saved, there was no

evidence that Siam was recognized on the same level among the civilized elites of the world or that its recognition helped save the country's independence. Instead, the assumed recognition was for domestic consumption to reaffirm the superiority of the royal elite among their subjects.

The making of the "nation" and the propagation of the royal nationalism in the 19th- early 20th c. Siam were primarily the state's project, and never a force against a colonial state or the ruling power. It emerged and operated under the intimidating presence of the colonial powers. Therefore the alien enemy looms large in Thai nationalism that always assumes an anti-colonial overtone. But the colonial rule in Siam was permanently deferred. Thai nationalism from its beginning turns inwardly, emphasizing the danger from within and readiness among Thai people themselves, while celebrating the great leaders in whose hands the country's future and its prosperity will always be assured. The primary mission of nationalism in Siam from its beginning was to reaffirm the state's control and supremacy rather than to liberate from the alien's rule.

II. Under the condition described above, modern historiography and the new historical ideology was formulated. It reflected the views, even captures the spirit of the ruling Thai elite of the 1880s-1910s who went through the 1893 crisis and the subsequent years of self-civilizing transformation. The master narrative of Thai history that emerged in the 1910s tells a long history of how the great monarchs have saved the country's independence times after times since the birth of the nation in the 12th or 13th c. until the modern time, and led it to current prosperity.

The “traditional” history in Siam was the religious stories of the righteous kings, especially the supreme ones or the “Universal Monarch”, in the Hindu-Buddhist political culture. The traditional forms and concepts of historical knowledge began to change since the second half of the 19th c. New styles of historical writing and antiquarianism as a practice were widespread by the 1880s-1890s. Yet the idea of writing a history of Siam as a “nation” did not appear until the mid-1900s. Several ideas of the national narrative were put forward. But it took another ten years for the narrative that eventually proved to be so powerful, ideologically speaking, to formulate.

The modern master narrative of Thai history tells a chronologically national story of how the great kings saved the country. This perception of the past was definitely shaped by the way the elite scholars in Bangkok at the time looked back and understood the 1893 crisis. It was how they made sense of their most recent painful past in the 1890s-1900s. In other words, it was the history that was shaped by, and seen through, the 1893 crisis and its consequences. In certain ways, it looks similar to an anti-colonial history of many post-colonial countries. But upon a closer look, it reveals peculiar characteristics of Siam nationalist history.

As the religious stories of great monarchs were reconceived and rewritten to fit the new theme of struggles for the country’s independence, the politico-religious story was turned into one of international domination and resistance. Strikingly, the struggles for independence were retrospectively accounted for many times since the early kingdoms of

the Siamese in the 12th or 13th c. Some went further back and found even more. The experience of the 1890s-1900s was pivotal, providing a meaningful historical conceptualization that generated the whole series of similar past. In other words, I would argue, ALL earlier episodes of the Thai past were merely allegories of the memory of the 1890s-1900s traumatic transition. These allegories help disguise their origin that was also the moment of the birth of the modern nation and the birth of the country's modern history.

In doing so, however, the significance of the European colonialism of the 19th c. is diffused, becoming just another episode in the long historical series of the struggles for independence. To put it in another way, colonialism is not the target of this historical ideology as much as an enemy – any enemy – of the Thai nation. It is a nationalist history, but not an anti-colonial one.

Who were the enemies in Thai history? The Europeans? France was an unforgettable enemy. Yet it was one of many historical foes. The master narrative turns the traditional archrival, the Burmese kings, from the evil (i.e. wicked, untrustworthy, heretic) into the foreign enemy of Siam. Other vassal and rival kings of pre-modern polity (for instance, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam) were similarly turned into enemies of the Siamese nation. The same old enemies of the pre-national history, i.e. of an imperial kingdom, are persistent. Certain characteristics of the traditional story of great monarchs and their empires are alive and well in the emerging nationalist history of Siam.

The traditional religious history of the righteous kings is a story of their glories and failures. Among the highest glories were the conquests and victories over the not-so-righteous ones or over the evil enemy to achieve the supremacy over all other lords. Although the righteous kings did not fight for the nation or its independence, this story was compatible with, thus conveniently reconceived to fit, the new theme and ideology of history. The result is the royal-nationalist history that entirely focuses on the leadership of great monarchs who were the nation's heroes, but never on their people, or a social or popular movement. It is a history that reaffirms the power of the regime but distrusts people.

III. The royal nationalism and its kind of history is distinctive, thanks to the crypto-colonial condition that gave birth to both of them. Except its ebb during the 1930s-1950s following the revolution in 1932 that ended the absolute monarchy, it has been the dominant kind of nationalism in Thailand throughout the 20th c. It has become even stronger and more influential since the 1960s when royalism was revived.

The royal-nationalist history has been very powerful in two ways, namely as an epistemic discourse of history and as a historical ideology. It sets the parameter and dictates the interpretations of Thai history even up to now. Most Thai historians subscribe to it subserviently. It has stifled historical scholarship and made it a servant of nationalism and the state. By doing so, nevertheless, the field has become a sensitive intellectual battlefield where radical scholarship often wages an ideological war.

As an historical ideology, it shapes public perception of the past, and the characteristics of Thai nationalism. So far, the opponents of this historical ideology have not been successful. The anti-monarchists of the 1930s-1950s tried to produce a nationalist history that was critical to the past monarchs. Yet their history virtually remained within the conceptual box of the royal-nationalist history. Moreover, it never challenged the royal elite's view of the history of the pivotal event that gave birth to the nation and was the foundation of the entire history of Siam, i.e. the 1893 crisis and the transition during the 1890s-1900s. A radical history such as the Marxist one was even more critical to the royal-nationalist history. Nevertheless, in many ways, it is not without the influences of the royal-nationalist history, partly because radicalism in Thailand advocates a form of radical nationalism. Besides, it never takes root in Thailand.