



The Beginning of a New Era in Thai-European Relations: King Chulalongkorn, the First “Honorary European”¹

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Abstract

King Chulalongkorn made his first visit to Europe in 1897. Through this visit which took place for concrete political reasons, the Kingdom of Siam gained acknowledgement from Europe. The success of the visit led to the resolution and reduction of political problems in the short term. In the long term the visit was very important for the preservation of the sovereignty of the Kingdom of Siam. It produced a psychological impact which impressed upon the Europeans and European Courts that His Majesty the King and the Kingdom of Siam were not barbaric, but civilized with a well-established culture. Another positive and *permanent* effect is that the European monarchs acknowledged and respected King Chulalongkorn as an equal. Both the Kingdom and the ruler were thus recognized.

The prevailing conditions at the time made King Chulalongkorn's travels to Europe not only advisable but unavoidable. Both trips to Europe in 1897 and 1907 set the stage for a new era in Siamese-European relations in many respects. His trips marked the start of official diplomatic relations with European countries and strengthened already existing ties between the Siamese court and some of the leading countries of Europe. These bonds would define the country's relations with Europe throughout the 20th century down to the formation of the European Union.

Key words: King Chulalongkorn, Thai-European Relations, Honorary European

¹ This article is based on a research project by Prof. Dr. Pornsan Watanangura and Ajarn Tosporn Kasikam entitled “Relations between the Royal Court of Siam and the Royal Houses of Europe in Documents Pertaining to King Chulalongkorn's First Trip to Europe in 1897”, 2009 (forthcoming), with support from the Ratchada Pisek Sombhot Fund, Chulalongkorn University.



1. Introduction

The significance of King Chulalongkorn's two official visits to Europe in 1897 and in 1907, and especially of the first trip, is two-fold. First, they were not merely the first extended trips made by a Siamese monarch to a distant continent, but were also a clear indication of His Majesty's firm grip on power. Even the German ambassador in Bangkok, Baron von Hartmann, remarked in a report to the Foreign Minister in Berlin written in 1897 that such a trip would likely have been impossible just ten years before, the probability of a revolt against the monarch having been much stronger then. That King Chulalongkorn was able to remain out of the country for several consecutive months and that he entrusted Her Majesty Queen Saovabha with overseeing the affairs of state in his absence attested to the stability of the political situation at the time and to His Majesty's confidence in the security of his own rule.²

This is of special significance in that King Chulalongkorn chose to make his trips to Europe at a time when cordial relations between the great European powers and the Siamese court seemed particularly out of reach. It required tremendous ingenuity on the part of the King to prevent the Western powers, chiefly Britain and France, from laying claim to the Kingdom of Siam, as they had done to the other countries in South-east Asia. The armed clashes between France and Siam of 1893 were the final spark that lit the fuse and prompted the King to embark on a new course of action aimed at preserving Siamese sovereignty. In the words of the King: "I must travel to Europe. It is essential that we establish a presence there."³

My argument is that King Chulalongkorn's trips to Europe in 1897 and 1907 set the stage for a new era in Siamese-European relations. These bonds would define the country's relations with Europe throughout the 20th century down to the formation of the European Union. Especially important is that on these trips, the monarch was received as an "equal" by the crowned heads and leaders of Europe. In sailing to the continent, King Chulalongkorn set Siam on a course of development based almost entirely on the Western model. His trips marked the start of *official* diplomatic relations

²Report from the German Ambassador in Bangkok to the Chancellor (Reichkanzler) in Berlin, dated April 16, 1897, in the German Political Archives, German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, R 19239 Volume 19, 20. SIAM NO. 1 A 6488.

³Letter from King Chulalongkorn to Prince Svasti Sophon, dated September 3, 1893, cited in Jiraporn Sathapanawatana, *Siam in Crisis R.E.112*. Bangkok: Teachers Training Department 1976, p. 194.



with European countries such as Russia, Norway, and Poland, and strengthened already existing ties between the Siamese court and some of the leading countries of Europe, especially Russia, Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Verification of my argument requires an examination of the lasting impact of the two royal visits to Europe amidst an atmosphere of growing tension, not only in Siam, but throughout much of Southeast Asia and Europe as well. What precisely were the prevailing conditions at the time which made King Chulalongkorn's travels to Europe not only advisable but unavoidable? What did the King encounter in Europe, and how did his visits shape Thai-European relations in the long term?

2. An Overview of Europe-Asia Relations at the End of the 19th Century

It is generally accepted that the Siamese monarch's first trip to Europe in 1897 was made necessary by the expansionist policies of the major European powers, particularly France (subsequent to the Franco-Siamese armed clashes of 1893) and Britain. The King was also motivated by his desire to acquire Western knowledge that could be used to promote the modernization and development of his country. His second trip, in 1907, is seen as necessitated by concerns over His Majesty's health.

It is my intention here to examine the political, social, economic and cultural context prevailing in Europe and Asia at the time of King Chulalongkorn's historic trips, and in so doing, I hope to shed some light on the lasting importance of these voyages, which ushered in a new era in European-Siamese relations and saw the Siamese king hailed as the first "honorary European."

At the end of the 19th century, conditions in Siam and throughout the region were changing rapidly. Even before King Chulalongkorn came to the throne, the political and cultural context was no longer what it had been in the days of the kings of Ayutthaya and King Taksin of Thonburi. Wars with neighboring countries and clashes with European powers intent on extending their influence in the region were becoming increasingly common. A number of Siam's neighbors lost their independence and sovereignty after armed clashes with French and British troops pursuing their governments' imperialist policies. These events had a profound impact on Siamese policies toward its neighbours and the Western powers. Numerous conflicts occurred, and as a result, the Siamese throne entered into a series of treaties aimed at preserving the country's independence. It was within this context that King Chulalongkorn, the fifth monarch of the Royal House of Chakri Dynasty, found it imperative to travel to Europe.



The first sign of Western imperialist designs on the region appeared during the reign of King Rama II, when Britain sent ambassador John Crawfurd to the court of Siam from 1821-1822 and again from 1823-1824. This marked the official resumption of diplomatic ties which had been severed with the fall of Ayutthaya. In addition, the first of a series of wars between Britain and Burma, which erupted in 1825, during the reign of King Rama III, convinced the king of Siam of the imminent danger and the necessity to be aware of the coming situation. This resulted in the signing of its first treaty with Britain, Burney's Treaty, as well as a treaty with the United States of America.

In 1826, the rebel Prince Anuvong of Vientiane raised an army, intending to march on Bangkok under the pretense of helping the Siamese fend off the British. Between 1833 and 1847, Siam went to war with Vietnam. A total of four battles were fought. China also came into conflict with the Western powers. The most disastrous of these encounters was China's defeat during the Opium Wars, fought between 1839 and 1842.

During the reign of King Rama IV, Burma lost the second of its wars against the British (1851-1868) and during the reign of King Rama V, in 1885, after a third and final war, Burma was forced to cede sovereignty to the Western colonizer.

In Northeastern Asia, after a policy of isolation that had lasted for more than two hundred years, the Japanese opened their doors to the outside world. Under the persuasion of American gunboat diplomacy, Japan signed the Treaty of Kanagawa in 1854, during the reign of King Rama IV. India became a British colony in 1858, during the time of King Rama IV.

Siam and the countries in Indochina under Siamese control, namely Cambodia and Laos, experienced similar turmoil during this time. The French took an interest in Vietnam and had begun to play a role in Cambodian affairs as a result of Vietnamese interference in the country. Eventually, Siam in the reign of King Rama IV was obliged to sign a treaty with the French in Paris in 1867 (B.E. 2410), recognizing Eastern Cambodia as a French protectorate and ceding the outer part of Cambodia, later the inner part of Cambodia, to the French in exchange for Siamese control over the western part of the city of Trat.⁴

⁴Pornsarn Watanangura, Tosporn Kasikam, "Relations between the Royal Court of Siam and the Royal Houses of Europe in Documents Pertaining to King Chulalongkorn's First Trip to Europe in 1897", 2009, research supported by Chulalongkorn University, Ratchada Pisek Sombhot Fund, p. 16, Photocopy, to be published by Chulalongkorn University, forthcoming.



These events were all warning signs of the Western powers' imperialist intentions in South and Southeast Asia. France and Britain, in particular, were no longer content to maintain trade and religious missions in the countries of the region as in earlier times. New circumstances brought about profound changes in the economies of Siam, China and other neighbouring countries. The tremendous impact of these changes on the Siamese legal and political systems, which first became evident during the reign of King Rama III, would eventually bring about a whole new economic, social, political and cultural order in Siam.

What is clear is that Europe was chiefly responsible for the changes that took place in Siam in the 19th century. Historical evidence, especially from the two European tours undertaken by King Chulalongkorn in 1897 and in 1907, points not only to the Siamese leader's political and diplomatic acumen, but also to his interest in European art, culture, languages, ways of life, administrative system and politics. This is especially interesting in light of the fact that the King was visiting Europe at a time when the major powers were unlikely to recognize the monarch of a small Asian nation as an equal partner, set as they were on pursuing a policy of colonization throughout much of Asia.⁵

In an opening address marking the publication in five European languages of the account of King Chulalongkorn's first trip to Europe in 1897 by the Centre for European Studies at Chulalongkorn University, European Union ambassador, H.E. Klauspeter Schmallenbach remarked that King Chulalongkorn's success in establishing cordial relations with the European powers at such a difficult time was no less an achievement than that of French Foreign Minister Robert Schumann, who convinced his German counterpart to sign a treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community in the 1950s⁶, not long after the conclusion of the Second World War.⁷

⁵ Professor Dr. Eberhard Lämmert, Professor of Literature and Comparative Literature, expressed a similar view in the article "King Chulalongkorn's Experiences with European Culture": "King Chulalongkorn embarked on a journey to a foreign continent at a time when any real partnership between European powers and his country was inconceivable...". In: *The Journal of European Studies, Special Edition*, Year 12, Volume 1, January - June 2004, 38.

⁶ Schumann relied for success on close cooperation with Konrad Adenauer, the first Chancellor of the newly-formed Federal Democratic Republic of Germany, a country that historically had been an enemy of the French and that had only recently occupied their country. Then in 1963, France, represented by President Charles de Gaulle, and Germany under Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, signed a Friendship Treaty.

⁷ H.E. Klauspeter Schmallenbach, King Chulalongkorn – A First True Honorary European. In: *The Journal of European Studies, Special Edition*, Year 12, Volume 1, January - June 2004, 11-79.



What was happening in Europe at the time of the Siamese monarch's trips to the continent, and what exactly did he encounter during his travels? At the end of the 19th century and continuing on until the end of the Second World War in 1945, Europe was at the very heart of the major changes affecting world events. More than any other continent, Europe drove changes, the consequences of which are still felt today. For instance, the Industrial Revolution, which began in Europe, transformed global economics, politics, culture, art, literature, music and philosophy. Europe gave birth to new countries, and it was in Europe that the fanned up cult of "nationalism" – as a force for both good and bad--was first felt.

The cultural heart of Europe at the end of the 19th century was Vienna. It was here that "fin de siècle" malaise was most in evidence. Europe at the time was widely marked among European intellectuals and artists by feelings of hopelessness and despair. It was seen as a period of moral decline, when man's soul had been robbed by the impersonal machinery of the Industrial Revolution. Competition among major European powers was also rife as countries fought to hold on to their colonies and expand their economic and political sphere of influence throughout Asia and Africa. In Southeast Asia, it was principally Britain and France, already in conflict over their interests in Egypt, who were eager to exert their control. In Russia, the czar was eager to assert his power in Eastern Europe, in the Balkan peninsula, and in those parts of Asia bordering China and Afghanistan. Russian ambitions brought the Imperial Court in Moscow into conflict with the British, who exercised control over India, Burma and other areas bordering on China and Afghanistan. In contrast, Germany took a less aggressive stance, seeking out a few small colonies chiefly in Africa. Having only been established in 1871, the German Empire was still too fragile to enter into direct confrontation with either Britain or France. Chancellor Bismarck formed strategic alliances with numerous countries in Europe, with the intention of isolating traditional rival France.

Former powers Italy and the Austro-Hungarian Empire had begun to wane, having been forced to withdraw from large areas once under their influence. Austria-Hungary was at odds with Russia over their conflicting interests in the Balkans. For its part, Italy, drawn into a conflict with France over Tunisia and unhappy about the Royal British Navy's presence in the Mediterranean, eagerly signed a pact with Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1882. This would expand to include Romania and Spain in the following year.



In fact, the “mosaic” nature of the European continent, with its large number of nation-states, ethnicities and languages, would eventually lead to one of the bloodiest conflicts in human history, the First World War. Paradoxically, it is precisely Europe’s mosaic quality that accounts for much of the continent’s charm up to the present day.

King Chulalongkorn, however visited a Europe not yet scarred by the two world wars of the 20th century—a Europe still at the peak of its political, cultural, diplomatic, and military power. It would take the continent almost half a century to recover from the wounds inflicted by these wars, and in the meantime, the balance of power in the world would shift from the Old World to the New. The United States assumed a dominant role in the world, culturally, politically, militarily and subsequently economically. In the 1960s, several countries in Western Europe embraced a call for European integration and, in 1967, established the European Economic Community (EEC). With the ratification of the Treaty on European Union, otherwise known as the Maastricht Treaty, signed in 1992, the European Union came into being.

3. King Chulalongkorn as the ‘Civilizer of Asia’ and the First ‘Honorary European’

A careful analysis of the two trips that King Chulalongkorn made to Europe in 1897 and 1907 shows that the European perception of “Siam” and the “Siamese king” underwent a transformation as a result of the monarch’s travels across the continent. Abundant documentary evidence confirms that praise and admiration were heaped on the King by European royals and commoners alike. In the Swiss newspaper *Der Bund* of June 5, 1897, there is an account by the Markgräfin von Ansbach-Bayreuth of the Russian Czar Peter’s journey to Western Europe, in which the Baroness remarks:

“From a European perspective, King Chulalongkorn is much more elegant and graceful in both appearance and manner than Czar Peter of Russia.”⁸

After King Chulalongkorn’s visit to Sweden, a stretch of road between Utanede and Holleforsen was named in his honour. On his first journey across the continent in

⁸ *Der Bund*, Bern. Saturday, June 5, 1897. From the column Feuilleton, “König Paramindr Maha Chulalongkorn in Berner Oberland, transcribed in German from Gotik script.



1897, the Siamese monarch was frequently hailed as “The Civilizer of the East” and “the most educated of the Asian rulers.”⁹

What explains the fact that the monarch of a “country beyond India”¹⁰ received such praise and was accepted as an equal by the royal courts and leading men and women of Europe?



Kaiser Franz Josef I of the Austro-Hungarian Empire greeting his guest from Siam at the railway station, Vienna. Picture from the newspaper *Illustriertes Wiener Extrablatt*, 24 June 1897

That King Chulalongkorn travelled through Europe “independently,”¹¹ as noted in a letter of invitation written by his brother, Prince Svasti Sophon, in London, is historically significant. Yet while the warmth of his reception on the continent may have been a matter of simple courtesy or a result of the “independent” nature of his trip,

⁹ From the Illustrated Weekly, July 3, 1897 in *The 100th Anniversary of the Visit of the King of Siam Chulalongkorn (Rama V) to the Kingdom of Poland*, page 17, The publication commissioned by the Royal Thai Embassy in Poland with the assistance of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Texts prepared by the Institute of History, Warsaw University.

¹⁰ Prior to the 19th century, most Europeans, Germans included, were unfamiliar with Siam and had no clear idea of where Siam was. They were, however, familiar with two of Asia’s largest countries: India and China, and therefore referred to Siam as a “land beyond India.” (Das Land hinter Indien)

¹¹ From a letter dated February 26, 1896, on *King Chulalongkorn’s trip to Europe, 1897*, Volume 1, National Archives, Fine Arts Department, 1980, page 43.



his acceptance as an equal to the crowned heads of Europe—as a genuinely ‘civilized’ man—is not so easily explained. It can only be accounted for by the force of the King’s personality. Throughout his travels, King Chulalongkorn demonstrated a quick wit and a lively intelligence. That he spoke fluent English and had a firm grasp of European culture and affairs was an important advantage. He dressed carefully ‘from head to toe in the latest English fashion’¹², as remarked on by a Polish newspaper. His manners were impeccably European, but in his face, his warm smile, and his small Asian eyes, he retained an air of the ‘exotic.’ In his movements, he was compared to a ‘black panther,’ and his natural elegance and ‘dignity’ marked him as unmistakably royal. This was especially true of his jet-black eyes which sparkled with intelligence, wit, and interest in everything around him.¹³

However, the most important factor in winning the Europeans’ admiration and respect was the King’s European education. It was also widely known that he had abolished slavery without the need for bloodshed, and that he was an advocate of Western-style education reforms in Siam including administrative reform and the introduction of new technology, such as railroad, telegraph, telephone and electricity, to Siam. These attributes combined to make the King an Asian ally who recognized the value of Western culture as a civilizing force. King Chulalongkorn was, therefore, deserving of European friendship since he had shown himself to be not an alien ‘other,’ but ‘one of us.’ There was no reason for the people of Western Europe to fear him, and despite his appearance and the foreign nature of his native customs, he could be seen as ‘exotic,’ charming and interesting, rather than odd or strange. In other words, he was different but not exceedingly so.

¹² Prior to King Chulalongkorn’s trip to Europe in 1897, Great Britain had welcomed the kings of Turkey and Persia. The entourage of the Persian king, who had also visited Switzerland, was described as “an extravagant oriental procession. Wherever he stayed, he upset the local people but he showed little concern for them...When the prince of Amfakhan made a visit to England last year (1895), he cost the British government a vast sum of money, and no matter how many hints his hosts gave him, he stayed so long that everyone grew tired of him...”. From an invitation written by Prince Svasti Sophon in London dated February 26, 1896, in *King Chulalongkorn’s Visit to Europe in 1897*, Volume 1 (Footnote 12), page 45.

¹³ *The 100th Anniversary of the Visit of the King of Siam Chulalongkorn (Rama V) to the Kingdom of Poland*, page 17, The publication commissioned by the Royal Thai Embassy in Poland with the assistance of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Texts prepared by the Institute of History, Warsaw University.



4. A New Era in Siamese-European Relations: Political, Social and Cultural Ramifications

While the most tangible rationale for King Chulalongkorn's first trip to Europe in 1897 was to prevent the kingdom from becoming a colony of the West, there were other more abstract reasons for the journey. The first of these was to familiarize the West with Siam and to fix in the minds of people of Europe an image of the country as 'civilized.' This is why it mattered that the King was hailed by the European media as an intelligent leader skilled in winning the hearts of almost all those he met, whether royals like himself or common people. The affection he was shown was virtually equal to that showered upon him by his own subjects in Siam.

This first voyage to Europe marked an important turning point in relations between Siam and the countries of Europe. King Chulalongkorn succeeded in changing the way in which the West viewed Siam, its monarchy and its people. Siam was no longer just the name of an exotic, faraway land—it was a real place. With the King's trip, Siam and the countries of Europe entered a new era in diplomatic, political and cultural relations. A journey of equal significance would later be undertaken by Their Majesties King Bhumibol Adulyadej and Queen Sirikit, who travelled around the world in 1960, fifteen years after the conclusion of World War II.

More than a century after King Chulalongkorn's two successful trips to Europe, history tells us that Siam was one of only five Asian nations never colonized by the West, the other four being Afghanistan, Iran, Japan and China. The great powers of Europe were particularly intent on asserting their control over Siam, Afghanistan and Iran. In Afghanistan and Iran, British interests to the East clashed with Russian ambitions from the West, and Siam found itself squeezed between the British presence in Burma and India to the West, British Malaya in the South and the French in Indochina to the East.

4.1 The Impact on Education: Getting a European Education

The political tensions that afflicted Siam and many of the other countries of Asia at the end of the 19th century not only spurred on national development and Western-style changes in local education systems, but also accounted for the Siamese court's



decision to send numbers of the Royal family and nobles to Europe to complete their education. As a result, Europe was seen from a new perspective. This showed themselves ready to adopt new ways of thinking and a world view that was essentially Eurocentric. This new openness to Western knowledge was not restricted to just science and technology, political science, economics, literature and history. It extended to military science as well, as evidenced by the fact that it quickly became customary for Siamese princes to be sent to Europe, and especially to Germany, for military training. King Chulalongkorn sent several of his sons and other high-ranking ennobled officials to Germany, Denmark and Russia¹⁴ for this purpose. The strategic alliances that resulted proved an effective balance against French and British imperialist designs on South-east Asia.



His Royal Highness Prince Chakrabongse Bhuvanath and
Mr. Pum during their studying at the Military School in Russia

¹⁴ Prince Paribatra Sukumbhand underwent military training in Germany; Prince Jiraprawatvoradech in Denmark and Germany, and Prince Chakrabongse Bhuvanath in Russia.



The centuries-old tradition of cementing cordial relations between European countries or the peaceful expansion of influence through marriage between members of Europe's royal families was principally changed by King Chulalongkorn.

By sending his sons and grandsons to study in Europe, the King initiated a custom that has continued to be observed by Thailand's ruling classes throughout the 20th century.

4.2 Education and the Birth of 'Thai' Studies

As is generally recognized, Buddhism, unlike Christianity, is not a missionary religion. Whereas Christians are under an obligation to spread the word of Christ to unbelievers, Buddhists do not feel the same moral imperative to spread the teachings of the Buddha or to convert people of different races and creeds to the Buddhist faith.

Since the time of the Buddha there have been very few systematic attempts to propagate Buddhism in Asia. Perhaps the most important of these was undertaken by the great Indian emperor Ashoka, beginning in the 3rd Century B.C.. There is, however, a long tradition of spreading the Buddhist teachings through the *Tipitaka* (the Buddhist scriptures). For example, the Chinese missionary monk Xuanzang travelled to India and brought back with him more than 600 Sanskrit texts, which he then translated into Chinese. But the first time in which the sacred Buddhist texts were disseminated in the West is likely to have taken place when King Chulalongkorn travelled to Switzerland from where he sent a telegram to His Royal Highness Prince Paribatra Sukumbhand, asking him to have a Thai-language version of the Christian Bible printed as a gift to the city museum in Geneva.¹⁵ This gesture attests to His Majesty's thoughtfulness and exceptional attention to details. Prior to the trip of 1897, the King had also presented a 39-volume edition of the *Tipitaka* to the library of the University of Rostock in Germany to mark the 25th anniversary of his accession to the throne. In the first volume there is an inscription in Thai, English, French, and German. On his trip to England, the King also presented a copy of the *Tipitaka* to the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland.

¹⁵ From a telegram dated May 25, 1897, in *King Chulalongkorn's Visit to Europe in 1897*, Volume 1 (Footnote 12), page 266.



The *Chulachomklau BoromThammikamaharat Tipitaka* R.E.112 on the shelf at the Faculty of Indology, University Göttingen, Germany (39 Volumes, cover in yellow-gold)



The cover of the *Chulachomklau BoromThammikamaharat Tipitaka*

The dissemination of the Buddhist teachings through gifts of the *Tipitaka* to recipients abroad has become a tradition that has continued to thrive in the reign of the present king, the ninth monarch of the Royal House of Chakri. Recently, the texts have been translated into a number of foreign languages, and there are plans to distribute them in countries around the world.

It is interesting to note that the academic study of Buddhism, Sanskrit, Pali, and other fields relating to “India” and the “Thai” has flourished and grown in the West, especially in England and Germany, for many years. The King’s brother, ‘Prince Svasti’ was lavished with praise in the Swiss newspaper *Der Bund* during His Majesty’s first trip around Europe, in part because he had studied Sanskrit with a German professor in England, Prof. Dr. Friedrich Max Müller, in England known as Prof. Max Müller. In Germany at least since the end of the 18th century, a Romantic poet and philosopher Karl Wilhelm Friedrich von Schlegel (1772-1829) began a serious study of Sanskrit in order to determine the origins of the German language.¹⁶

These have been legitimate areas of study in Germany at least since the end of the 18th century. Schlegel also authored a book entitled *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der*

¹⁶ Schlegel found that German is part of a language family that includes Latin, Greek, Sanskrit and Pali, and which is termed Indo-Germanen, or Indo-Germanic. This study marked the beginning of comparative historical linguistics in 19th century Europe.



Inder (On the Language and Wisdom of India, 1808). The book examines the languages and genius of the sub-continent and was the preparation of Indology, a field that has remained vibrant at German universities ever since.

It might even be said that Western research methodology, at least in Germany, which gives emphasis to the study of original texts, can be traced back to the *Tipitaka* and other early Buddhist texts. The existence of these texts may also help to explain the fact that Sanskrit, Pali and Thai studies have spread throughout Europe and are not seen merely as the province of Buddhist monks. A number of leading European universities, such as the University of London, now offer doctoral degree programmes in Thai studies, which are attended by both Thai and non-Thai students. The Thai Department of the Faculty of Arts at Chulalongkorn University has also been offering a Ph.D. programme in Thai language for 35 years, while Thai scholars have been able to pursue a similar degree in “Thai studies” since 1991.

King Chulalongkorn’s unequivocal support for religion, whether Buddhism, Christianity, or otherwise, was as responsible for the admiration shown by Europeans for the King as his education or his respect for Western culture. Even Pope Leo XIII, the leader of the Roman Catholic Church and head of state of the Vatican, had his portrait sent to the King as a memento of his visit to the Vatican. The portrait bore the inscription: “We saw a star rise in the East.”¹⁷ His Majesty also made a point of demonstrating to the Europeans the kindness of the Siamese people through his generous donations to hospitals and orphanages in almost all of the countries he visited. Not only did these charitable contributions offer proof of the moral and financial superiority of this Asian monarch, but they were also intended to show the kindness and compassion of the Buddhist faithful, who unlike many Christians are not bound by their religion to cling to the belief in only one true god—a belief that makes them intolerant of other faiths. The commandment not to have “any other god before me”¹⁸ leads to misinterpretation by some Christians as they feel that they are superior to non-Christians, who are regarded as heathens and heretics. In the 19th century this belief in the superiority of the Christian religion was used to legitimize Western colonialist policies. Christians had a duty to convert the heathens to the one true religion, or failing this, to destroy them.

¹⁷ In: *A Nação*, Volume 21, October 1897.

¹⁸ Two of the chief tenets of Christianity are: 1. “Thou shalt have no other gods before Me” and 2. “Love your neighbours as yourself.”



This tendency has marked all of Western history from the start of the Christian era. Only the degree of violence has varied.

4.3 Cordial diplomatic and foreign relations

King Chulalongkorn’s historic first trip to Europe in 1897 marked an important turning point in relations between Siam and Europe. Europeans were given a more accurate view of Siam, its monarch and its people. The country was no longer a far-away, fantasy land. Diplomatic, political and cultural relations were altered forever. King Chulalongkorn’s travels through Europe served a purpose as important as the round-the-world tour made by Their Majesties King Bhumibol Adulyadej and Queen Sirikit after the Second World War—an historic trip that reacquainted the world with Thailand and the country’s young monarch. In 1960, the world was entering a new phase in its history. It was the Cold War. Tensions between the capitalist economies of the West and the Communist Eastern bloc were heating up, and the countries of Europe were seeking to forge new bonds after the destruction of the Second World War. His Majesty King Bhumibol set off on his journey at a time when Communist ideology threatened to topple governments throughout Southeast Asia. Like his grandfather before him, the present monarch excited the people of the West. His arrival in Europe was a symbol of Thailand’s reopening and reorientation to the West.



ด้วยพระอภัย
ผู้เจริญได้มาอยู่ที่นี้ ได้ดูจากภาพว่าด้วยของพระสุทธานามันน่าประหลาดจริง...ฉันดูสองคนก็เห็นว่า โอ้ พระมา
กันมา...ฉันเห็นคนที่ตัวใหญ่กว่าแต่ตัวเล็กของท่า...ฉันเห็นคนรูปร่างงาม...ฉันเห็นคนตัวเล็ก...
สมเด็จพระนางเจ้าสุทธานามัน

*My Dear Lck,
Right now I am here in Holland after leaving the Grand Palace in the Napier at one o'clock... The
two queens greeted me at the train steps. They look me to tea... The Queen Regent is twice your
size... The smaller Queen has a much more beautiful figure... Her smiles and lively disposition like
a child's...
Chulalongkorn*

King Chulalongkorn in the Netherlands 1897.
“The small Queen and Queen Regent”:
(left) The “small Queen” or Queen Wilhelmina,
ascending the throne in the year 1890 at the age of
10 and Queen Emma as Queen Regent (right)



Their Majesties King Bhumipol and Queen
Sirikit together with King Baudouin II of
Belgium in 1960



The principal legacy of King Chulalongkorn's first trip to Europe in 1897 is the establishment of enduring diplomatic, political, and cultural ties between Thailand and numerous European countries. In some cases, the bonds between royal families have even grown stronger over the years.



Queen Sirikit during the state visit in Russia in the year 2007

5. Conclusion

In the 110 years since King Chulalongkorn's first trip to Europe, His Majesty's wisdom and farsightedness have only become increasingly clear. His journey transformed the perception of "Siam" in Europe and that of "Europe" and "the Europeans" in Siam. In a letter written to Queen Saovabha during his trip, King Chulalongkorn remarked that certain circumstances prevented him from gaining a truly deep understanding of European life.

"[...]It seems to me that there are four main things that I've seen in Europe. First of all, I have seen how Europeans live. I have seen the source of their wealth and power. I have seen their armies, and I have seen many of their forms of entertainment. But because of the short duration of my visit, I haven't been able to study their bureaucracy in any detail. With regard to how they live, I realize that I have learned something of the lives of the nobles, but I have had little opportunity to observe the middle class.



“With regard to the second of these things, I have had no chance to observe anything in great depth [...]

“The same is true of my knowledge of their military. You might even say that I’ve seen nothing, and what I have seen, I cannot explain [...]

“As for the fourth of these things, I can say that I have learned nothing. All I know is what I have seen at the formal receptions I have attended. I know nothing about their everyday lives. If I were asked about the best hotels, the best plays, I could not answer. I know nothing. I can say that on this trip, I have done nothing for myself. Everything has been done for me.

“For this reason, I can say that I have gained very little personally from this trip to Europe. If the trip has been of any benefit, it has benefited the people and country of Siam.”¹⁹

For anyone to understand and analyze events as they happen is a very difficult matter. Therefore, King Chulalongkorn’s quick grasp of events is a mark of true wisdom and intelligence. This is especially evident during the final weeks of his second trip to the continent. The observations he made of Europe and Europeans in 1907, over a century ago, seem incredibly prescient today.

“When people ask what Europe is like, the answer depends on what is of interest to the person speaking, but as for me, the question is much too general. There is no more untamed landscape. All of the arable land is under cultivation. Not a single square inch of unused land remains. There is no more room for further expansion. The only idle land is where there are rocks and pebbles that make the land unusable. All available farmland is already under cultivation.

“Mineral resources such as coal have also been fully exploited. There are no unexplored resources remaining. The land is being worked everywhere. All of the resources are owned. Minerals remain abundant but for how many thousands of years this will continue to be true, who can say? The land is not densely populated, as is said to be the case in China. People in the past often spoke of Europe as being

¹⁹ From a letter (44) written by King Chulalongkorn to Queen Saovabha Phongsri who served as regent during the King’s trip to Europe in 1897, in *The Private Letters of King Chulalongkorn to Queen Saovabha Phongsri*, published by the Prince Damrong Rajanubhap and Princess Chong Chit Thanom Diskul on the occasion of the 5th Cycle Birthday of Her Majesty Queen Sirikit, August 12, 1992, pages 153-154.



like China. While it is true that there are many people, the countryside is not crowded. But the people must eat, and the countries of Europe are already producing as much food as they can. There is enough food for people today, but in the future, as the population grows, there will not be enough land to support them as all the available farmland in Europe is already under cultivation. It will be necessary to expand trade in order to find enough food to eat, or it will be necessary to make money from other countries with which to purchase food.

“The Europeans have already settled the Americas, and taken control of almost all of Africa. They have settled across the entire continent of Australia as well, and colonized large portions of Asia. The reason for this is there are no more available resources in Europe, and this has made it necessary for them to look elsewhere.

“Yet on the other hand, despite the lack of untapped resources in Europe, the Europeans have prospered. As a result of their knowledge, intelligence and perseverance, they have developed the tools to create a world. Over a period of 6,000 years, they have acquired an amazing knowledge of the uses to which the world’s plants and minerals can be put. Some of the knowledge they have forgotten or lost, they have recreated. For example, they have put steam to a multitude of uses, and more recently, they have found countless uses for electricity. What invention will come next, who can say?”²⁰

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²⁰ From *Klai Ban (Far From Home)*, Volume 2, Bangkok: Prae Pittaya Press, pages 867-870.



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