Thailand

A Short History

DAVID K. WYATT

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Yale University Press
New Haven and London

Designed by James J. Johnson
and set in Baskerville Roman by
Asco Trade Typesetting Ltd., Hong Kong.
Printed in the United States of America by
Edwards Brothers, Inc., Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Wyatt, David K.
Thailand: a short history.

Bibliography: p.
Includes index.
1. Thailand—History. I. Title.
DS571.W92 1984 959.3 83–25953
ISBN 0–300–03054–1
0–300–03582–9 (pbk)

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

Preface

The presentation of the history of Thailand to the Western reader began in the 1840s, when American missionaries, helped by the soon-to-be King Mongkut, contributed a series of articles on the history of Siam to a Hong Kong newspaper. In the century and a half since then, few have followed their lead. The only general history of the kingdom is W. A. R. Wood's *A History of Siam*, first published in 1926 and subsequently reissued only in Bangkok without revisions. Thailand deserves better. Its long history as the only country of Southeast Asia to escape colonial rule in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries demands thoughtful consideration, and its long tradition of independence and development provides a useful case study to compare with the history of its neighbors. Most of all, however, Thailand's history is worth studying simply because it "is there," certainly as much so as the histories of Indonesia and Vietnam, for example.

To try to encompass several thousand years in a few hundred pages is rather like trying to capture the essence of a sculpture in a single photograph. Most of the pages of this book might quite easily be expanded several dozen times over with the work of several generations of scholars. This book, however, is directed primarily to the general reader, those who develop some interest in Thailand for whatever reason, and the beginning student. For this audience an extensive scholarly apparatus, with dense clouds of footnote references to Thai sources and arcane tomes, would be both superfluous and confusing. Serious students of Thailand will either recognize the sources from which I have worked or be guided to them by the "Suggestions for Further Reading" at the end of the volume. I trust that, by aiming this history at the general reader, my specialist colleagues will not feel that I have abandoned them.

One of my friends suggested that I might have done better to structure the book differently, to write separate chapters dealing with economic questions in

each time period and so forth. Had I done so, this book would have run on for many times its present length. I chose instead to weave, as artfully as my skills allow, what I think is a wide variety of themes through what is basically a chronological framework. Topical concerns arise only when it seems necessary to deal with them; and the lowly Thai peasant farmer, I am afraid, emerges from the shadows only here and there over the many centuries with which we deal.

Kings, on the other hand, are on nearly every page, and I might quite justly be accused of displaying a royal bias, certainly through the period down to 1932. Kings function in the narrative in this way for several reasons. First, until the end of the absolute monarchy, the royal reign was a real unit of time. Individual rulers, because they had so much power, immediately and materially affected the lives of their subjects, whether directly or indirectly. As long as their individual personalities affected people's lives, I have had to concern myself with them. Second, I have the impression that readers expect to see kings through most of Thai history, and someone interested, for example, in finding out about Mongkut's reign would at least be disappointed if I had not given him the few pages he has here. Third, in the short compass of this book, political history has proven to be the least readily reduceable—I had to cut out the poets Si Prat and Sunthon Phu and Lady Phum, but I could not avoid talking about their sovereigns and patrons at some length.

I trust that the many deficiencies that remain in this book will detract only from my good name, not from the names of those on whom I have relied in writing it. Over the past twenty years I have continually picked up ideas, information, suggestions, and even inspiration from a host of friends and acquaintances. A special few proved to be ready sources of assistance, even those I see only at three- or five-year intervals. The late Dr. Kachorn Sukhabanij was among the first of these, a good friend and a good man to argue with. Tri Amatyakul, Praphat Trinarong, and Kullasap Gesmankit were always helpful, and the indefatigable Mrs. Kullasap, now head of the National Library, continues to be a model of courtesy and helpfulness. A. Thomas Kirsch, Charles Keyes, and Lauriston Sharp have, I hope, given me some anthropological sensitivities. Nidhi Aeusrivongse has been a superb correspondent and a valued source of intellectual stimulation. A few were generous enough to allow me to read their unpublished manuscripts, and I am especially grateful to the late Chester Gorman in this regard.

I have learned most from my graduate students, primarily but not exclusively those who have worked in the field of Thai history. Their theses and dissertations are in a prominent position on my study shelves, partly because I am proud of them but mainly because I use them so often; and most of them are

listed in the bibliography of this volume. These include the alumni of three institutions where I have had the privilege of teaching: the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London, the University of Michigan, and Cornell University. When one talks and argues with others, week after week and year after year, it becomes difficult to remember who first came up with what idea or suggested a new way of looking at a complicated phenomenon. I am indebted to them all.

A handful of people took the time and trouble to read and comment on part or all of the manuscript. Anthony Diller was especially helpful on linguistic matters and Hiram Woodward and Lorraine Gesick on some points of early history. The most helpful critics of the entire manuscript were Craig J. Reynolds, Nidhi Aeusrivongse, Benjamin A. Batson, and the Yale University Press's anonymous reader, whom I would love to be able to write a book good enough to satisfy. It is not their fault that this book is not better than it is.

Work on the book was begun under the tenure of a Senior Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1973–74, and I am grateful for their support, as well as for the continuing assistance of the Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, the Department of History, and the University Libraries' John M. Echols Collection on Southeast Asia.

Procuring illustrations proved much more difficult than I had imagined it would be. Three old friends were especially helpful: Mrs. Kullasap Gesmankit, acting for the National Library of Thailand and the Fine Arts Department; Penelope Van Esterik, and William L. Bradley. The maps were skillfully drawn to my specifications by Stephanie Voss. Douglas, Andrew, and James Wyatt repeatedly rescued me from the arcane perversities of the computer, while writing software that will serve me for years. And I am especially grateful to the Cornell Savoyards for the staff of life, and to a few good friends for their encouragement, constancy, and smiles.

DAVID K. WYATT

Ithaca, New York
October 1983

Editorial Note

Romanization

Throughout this work, the Thai Royal Academy's "General System of Phonetic Transcription" is used to romanize Thai names and words, and a similar phonetic system is used for Lao. Diacritics have been held to an absolute minimum, maintaining only *ü* (for the Royal Academy's *ue*), thus blurring the distinctions between *o*, *œ*, and *ǫ*. Personal names and titles are romanized following the preferences of the individuals concerned, when known; thus King Chulalongkorn and Prince Devawongse (not Čhulalongkon and Thewawong). Geographical nomenclature usually follows the standardized forms of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names, as employed, for example, on the maps of the National Geographic Society.

The aspirated consonants *p*, *t*, and *k* are written *ph*, *th*, and *kh*, but they are not pronounced as they would be in English. Thus, Thai *phon* is like English *cornpone*, not *telephone*, and Thai *that* is pronounced *tut*, not *that*.

Names, Ranks, and Titles

Surnames are a twentieth-century innovation in Thailand, and Thai usually are referred to by their given name, not their surname—even in telephone directories. Sarit Thanarat thus is referred to as Prime Minister Sarit, not Prime Minister Thanarat.

In premodern times, various terms were used to denote royalty. The oldest are such terms as *chao* (Shan *sao*), *khun*, and *thao*. Modern Thai royalty is governed by a rule of declining descent, by the terms of which each successive generation diminishes one degree in status, until members of the sixth generation are commoners. The children and grandchildren of kings, termed *chao fa*

or *phra ong chao*, and *mom chao*, are usually referred to as princes and princesses. The next two generations are not. They are *mom ratchawong* (*M.R.W.* or *M.R.*) and *mom luang* (*M.L.*).

Ranks and titles were conferred on the bureaucratic and military nobility until the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932, a rank and title usually being associated with an office. The *chaophraya* were highest on the list, the equivalents of cabinet ministers, generals, and the governors of the most important provincial cities. On a descending scale came *phraya*, *phra*, *luang*, and *khun*. While individuals usually were referred to by their ranks and titles, the individual's personal, given name was written after it to distinguish him from others with the same rank and title; thus, *Chaophraya* Yommarat (Pan, surname Sukhum) was distinguished from *Chaophraya* Yommarat (Thong-in).

Many who were conferred titles under the absolute monarchy perpetuated those titles as surnames, for example, Phibunsongkhram and Wichitwathakan.

Money and Measures

The only unit of Thai currency referred to in this study is the *baht*. It was valued at eight baht to the pound sterling before 1880 and ten baht through the 1880s; then followed a period of fluctuating rates that stabilized around thirteen baht in the World War I period and dropped to eleven baht until World War II. Since World War II, it has remained constant at around twenty to the U.S. dollar.

The only unit of Thai measure used here is the *picul*, equivalent to about 60 kilograms or 132 pounds.

The *rai*, a measure of land area, is equivalent to about 0.16 hectares, or 0.4 acres.

Chronology

All dates have been expressed in Western terms, converted from the complicated Thai luni-solar calendar. The key to their conversion is a series of tables in Roger Billard, "Les cycles chronologiques chinois dans les inscriptions Thaïs," *Bulletin de l'Ecole français d'Extrême-Orient* 51 (1963): 403–31, which give the Julian or Gregorian equivalent of the Thai New Year.

THAILAND

Thailand and its neighbors: physical geography.

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The Beginnings of Tai History

The people of modern Thailand are as varied as the populations of many nations of the world. They come in all shapes and sizes, complexions and statures, and include farmers and computer programmers, soldiers and bus drivers, merchants and students, princes and monks. Virtually all would, when asked, call themselves "Thai" and, in using this term, would imply a definition primarily political: they are "Thai" as citizens of Thailand, subjects of the Thai king. If pressed, they might extend their definition further, to give the term a cultural and linguistic sense, and be "Thai" as a speaker of the Thai language and a participant in Thai culture. All the things that make up "Thai" identity, however, have developed only slowly through many centuries, and none of the things to which the modern Thai now refers—political, cultural, linguistic—existed in its present form until relatively recently.

Indeed, the people who brought the core elements of the contemporary Thai identity to what is now Thailand did not even arrive in that central portion of the Indochinese peninsula until a thousand or so years ago. These were people for whom we had best reserve the word *Tai*, a cultural and linguistic term used to denote the various Tai peoples in general, peoples sharing a common linguistic and cultural identity which in historic times has become differentiated into a large number of separate identities. The modern Thai may or may not be descended by blood from the late-arriving Tai. He or she may instead be the descendant of still earlier Mon or Khmer inhabitants of the region, or of much later Chinese or Indian immigrants. Only over many centuries has a "Thai" culture, a civilization and identity, emerged as the product of interaction between Tai and indigenous and immigrant cultures.

In attempting to trace the history of Thailand, we must primarily be concerned with people, with culture, and with society, and only secondarily with their environment. The course of Thai history is complex because the