



SIAM'S FOREIGN RELATIONS  
IN THE REIGN OF  
KING MONGKUT, 1851-1868

NEON SNIDVONGS

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## FOREWORD

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The International Studies Center (ISC) wishes to express its deep appreciation to the family of the late Thanpuying Neon Snidvongs, through her nephew Dr. Anond Snidvongs, for permitting the ISC to publish for the first time her doctoral thesis "*The Development of Siamese Relations with Britain and France in the Reign of Maha Mongkut, 1851-1868*", under the title "*Siam's Foreign Relations in the Reign of King Mongkut, 1851-1868*", as another volume in the ISC's series of books on diplomatic history. Following the practice with theses that the ISC has published, editorial changes were made only when necessary or prudent in order to keep the book as close as possible to the original thesis submitted to The School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, in 1960. The original spelling of personal and place names have also been retained.

The conclusion of the Bowring Treaty with Great Britain in 1855, at the beginning of the reign of King Mongkut (Rama IV), ushered in the new era of Siam's (as Thailand was then known) relations with Western nations. Under the



Bowring and the "Bowring-type" Treaties, Siam relinquished its autonomy in judicial and fiscal matters to these Western countries. But what had begun as purely commercial relations soon took on a more political nature. The change was due mainly to the impetuous entrance of France into Indo-China, following the establishment of a French colony at the mouth of the Mekong River in 1862. Subsequent colonial expansion caused further problems for Siam. Consequently, Siam's foreign policy was highlighted by its efforts to maintain independence in the face of encroaching colonial powers.

In Thanpuying Neon's work, Siam's policies in dealing with Britain and France were examined in detail, based on Siamese, British and French archival materials, which had not yet been analysed extensively by that time. Her meticulous use of these archival materials gave us a tantalizing glimpse into the negotiations and diplomatic relations between Siam and the two major powers, the process as well as the characters involved. Her work clearly showed how Siam was able to adjust to the changing circumstances and how King Mongkut contributed to the formation of Siam's foreign policy.

The ISC believes that this work is crucial to the understanding of modern Thai diplomacy and hopes that readers will find it a useful source material on the subject of Siam's foreign relations.

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## ABSTRACT

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The relations of Modern Siam with the West dated back before King Mongkut's time although at his accession in 1851 they were near breaking point. For a correct estimate of the impact of his reign on the development of these relations it is necessary to examine the strange background from which Mongkut emerged and the condition of the country at the time, in particular of its tributary states which were to feature prominently in the years to follow. In contrast with her virtual isolation in 1851, at the death of King Mongkut 18 years later not only had Siam established treaty relations with almost every Western power but what had begun as purely commercial relations had taken on more of a political character. The change was due mainly to the impetuous entrance of France into Indo-China. The establishment of a French colony in 1862 at the mouth of the Mekong in Lower Cochin-China brought into prominence a small neighbouring kingdom. France came to regard Cambodia, situated on the upper reaches of the Mekong, as vital to the prosperity of her new colony, and to regret her former acknowledgement of



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Siam's suzerainty over this state, especially as the expected Franco-Siamese friendship had for various reasons failed to materialise. The vague nature of Siamese suzerainty however made it easy for France to remedy this error and in 1863 the French Protectorate of Cambodia was established. Siam did not give in without a struggle and in the process came very near to throwing in her lot with Britain, but in the negotiation in Paris in 1867 the French Government offered satisfactory compensation and Siam signed the Treaty of July 1867 renouncing all claims over Cambodia. Aided by the conciliatory attitude subsequently attempted by France King Mongkut before his death in October 1868 once again set Siam on the path of neutrality which he had mapped out for her when he was called to the throne in 1851.

## CHAPTER

# 1

## INTRODUCTION

King Mongkut's reign, 1851-1868, has to a large extent been thrown into the shade by the more eventful years under his son, and this is particularly true in Siam itself. In the average Siamese school textbook the modernisation of the country appears as an exclusive contribution of King Chulalongkorn and the problem of the danger to Siam of Western expansion in the nineteenth century crystallized around the Paknam incident of 1893 when two French gunboats forced open the passage up the river to Bangkok, the incident ending in the renunciation by Siam of all her claims over the territories on the left bank of the Mekong. Until recently major works in European languages on the reign of King Mongkut have been those written by his contemporaries. *Description du Royaume Thai ou Siam*, by Jean Baptiste Pallegoix, Bishop of Siam, published in Paris in 1854, is a typical book of the period. But in addition to the flora and fauna of the country, there is an informative history of the Catholic Missions in Siam from its first establishment in the seventeenth century until the accession of King Mongkut. Sir John Bowring draws very largely on Bishop Pallegoix's work for his two volumes on *The Kingdom and People of Siam*, published in London in 1858, but in this case the most valuable section is the detailed account, given in the form of a diary, of his own mission to Bangkok and the negotiation of the Anglo-Siamese treaty of 1855, the Bowring Treaty, which became the pattern for Siam's treaties with almost every country in Europe and with the United States, all concluded before the death of King Mongkut in 1868. Bowring had a

distinctly more favourable impression of Siam than his predecessors who went on official missions to Bangkok, i.e., John Crawford who was sent by the Governor-General of India in 1822; Captain Henry Burney, also of the Government of India, who gave his name to the first treaty Siam concluded with a Western power since the seventeenth century (the Burney Treaty of 1826); and finally, Sir James Brooke who represented the British Government in 1850. Bowring's experience is of interest in that it reflects the changed atmosphere of the Court of Bangkok, but his books end with his departure from Siam in April 1855.<sup>1</sup>

The principal major works on Siam are mostly by American authors. Virginia Thompson's *Thailand: The New Siam*, published in 1941, resembles older works in form - a comprehensive survey, political, economic, and cultural, with the emphasis on the post 1932 régime when the absolute monarchy gave way to the so-called constitutional form of government. Although she recognises that King Mongkut started the process of Westernisation of the country and was the author of many beneficial reforms of King Chulalongkorn, her accounts of Siam's relations with the West are fuller on the events under the reign of the latter, which she presents as a simple picture of a small nation successfully preserving its independence by playing two powerful rivals against each other. The gap in the history of pre-Chulalongkorn period is filled to some extent by more specialised works of another American - W.F. Vella's *The Impact of the West on Government in Thailand*, and *Siam under Rama III, 1824-1851*, published in



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1955 and 1957, for the writing of which the author makes use of sources in Siamese as well as in English language. The second work gives a detailed account of the economy of the country, history of her tributary states, and of relations with the West in the reign of King Mongkut's immediate predecessor and in the process King Mongkut suffers as much from the shadow of his half-brother as that of his son.

Virginia Thompson dismisses Siam's earlier contact with the West as half-hearted measures to stave off immediate danger and gives the impression that constructive policy for dealing with the Western expansion began under King Mongkut. W.F. Vella on the other hand contends that the policy which saved Siam's political independence, which he terms concessionary policy, as exemplified by the Burney Treaty of 1826, originated with Rama III, who was also the author of the supplementary tactics, carried on by Mongkut and perfected by Chulalongkorn, of calling in more than one power to act as a check against each other. The Burney Treaty, Vella points out, was followed by a similar treaty with the United States in 1833 and an invitation to France in 1840 to take the same step.

Although it was under King Mongkut that New Siam, as distinct from the old kingdom of Ayutthaya, first opened her doors fully to Western commerce, her relations with the West which began in the seventeenth century had never been completely broken off. They were maintained through the Catholic missionaries and later also through Protestants who began to arrive during the reign of the reputedly anti-West

Rama III. The British acquisition of Penang in 1786 and their presence in close proximity to the Siamese Malay States led to relations more official in character and to the Burney Treaty. In its turn this much-touted treaty produced various consequences, among them the mission of Sir James Brooke to Bangkok in 1850 to negotiate for its revision. The story of Siam's relations with the West in the reign of King Mongkut began, not at his accession in 1851, but in the last year of Rama III's reign when the Western nations were intensifying their efforts to get from Siam better terms for their commerce. Sir James Brooke's proposals, although rejected at the time, were incorporated in the Bowring Treaty of 1855 which remained in force for over half a century.

It was also during the Brooke negotiation that Prince Mongkut found practical use for his knowledge of English. He was made supervisor of the translation of the correspondence and was thus allowed the first glimpse of public affairs after 27 years of seclusion. Prince Mongkut, as is well known, chose to remain in the priesthood after his father's sudden death in 1824 and this choice in many ways affected his position as king later. This brings us to the second point which emerges from recent researches into Siamese history by Western scholars, and which the present work proposes to modify - the question of relations between kings and ministers. The conception of Oriental Despotism dies hard and Western historians writing about pre-1932 Siam focus their attention exclusively on what they believe to be the isolated figure of the king, their books containing at most

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only a passing reference to other ministers, and that rarely by name. The title of W.F. Vella's book, *Siam under Rama III*, chosen in all probability for reasons of convenience, is nevertheless particularly apt in this respect. In fairness it must be stated that in his earlier works, *The Impact of the West on Government in Thailand*, Vella has in some ways modified the picture of a despotic ruler, but while he points out that practical considerations, such as fear of revolt, often acted as effective checks on the exercise of the absolute powers, he lays great emphasis on the king's religious position as defender and chief supporter of the faith, as an asset of his power, admitting at the same time that in Siam the separation of Church and State has always been a reality. A Siamese interpretation of the tradition of absolute kingship is presented by Prince Dhani in an article, "The Old Siamese Conception of the Monarchy", in the *Journal of the Siam Society* 1954. The article, however, deals with the question as a whole, and the circumstances leading to Prince Mongkut's accession call for a special analysis of his position as king. Virginia Thompson represents him a despot, albeit with liberal ideas, fighting single-handed against the reactionary forces of the ruling classes as well as the common people, but contemporary accounts give a different picture. The question of King Mongkut's relations with his ministers is examined in detail not only in order to do justice to the contributions of these able ministers to the success of King Mongkut's reign, but also because of its influence on the attitude of the Western representatives in Bangkok. Confronted with unmistakable



signs of the relatively weak position of the king the Westerners had to forgo their conception of an oriental despot but they still clung to that of oriental court intrigues and attempted to benefit from the supposed rivalry between the King and his over-mighty subjects.

It is true, as Vella contends, that King Mongkut inherited from his predecessor the so-called concessionary policy, but before the end of his reign the nature of the concessions demanded from Siam had so changed that the whole problem of her relations with the West was transformed. By concluding commercial treaties with the West and executing to the best of her ability the provisions therein Siam had got rid of one possible cause of conflict, but to her the real danger of Western expansion took the form of a challenge of her claims over the tributary states, and the process of ceding to the Western powers large chunks of what she considered to be her territories began in the reign of King Mongkut although it increased in scale as the century drew to a close. It was not in 1893 that Siam found herself for the first time at the receiving end of the Western diplomacy of gunboats. In April 1865 the French Consul in Bangkok triumphantly reported to Paris that the presence of the gunboat *Mitraille* in Bangkok played a great part in the conclusion of the Franco-Siamese Convention in which Siam renounced her own claims over Cambodia and acknowledged the French protectorate over that state established in 1863.

The Western powers took their stand on the vague nature of Siam's relations with her tributary states. In this



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study the question of the tributary states is examined in detail from the Siamese point of view because of its profound influence on Siam's attitude towards Britain and France, the two powers most vital to her survival as an independent kingdom. British challenge to Siam's possession in the Malay Peninsula predated even King Mongkut and went back to the Siamese invasion of Kedah in 1821. That and the subsequent events, as well as the problem of the Siamese Malay States in the reign of King Mongkut which reached a crisis in the bombardment of Trengganu by British warships in 1862, have been amply dealt with in many books, notably L.A. Mills's *British Malaya 1824-1867* and this study will concentrate on the effect on the Siamese of the contrast between the ways France and Britain treated Siam's claim of suzerainty over the tributary states. Siam's difficulties with France are dealt with in greater details because although the whole of Cambodia, except Battambang and Angkor, was lost to France before 1868 the curious fact remains that this aspect of King Mongkut's problems has been ignored by most authors. Prince Damrong's biographical sketches of King Mongkut and his principal minister the Kalahome, while giving full credit to their wisdom in opening the country to the Westerners and to their handling of the difficult problems of incorporating this new element into the existing social order, are completely silent on the subject. In George Taboulet's publication *La Geste Française en Indochine: Histoire par les textes de la France en Indochine des origines à 1914*, only 6 out of 230 odd documents presented related to Cambodian affairs during the reign of

King Mongkut. *The Roots of French Imperialism in Eastern Asia* is the somewhat enigmatic title of another book by yet another American, J.F. Cady. It deals with the revival of French interests in Asia after the Vienna Settlements of 1815 and the major part of the book is devoted to France's attempts, at times in co-operation with Britain and the United States, and at times in competition with them, to force open the Chinese Empire. As this was the period when France was looking for a foothold in Asia there is also detailed examination of her interests in Cambodia in the 1850's. The book ends, however, with the establishment of a French colony in Lower Cochin-China in 1862 and in a summary account of its expansion into Cambodia and the Laos states along the Mekong there are many inaccuracies. Even in a book by a Siamese, *Thailand's Case*, written in English in 1941 in the midst of the Japanese-sponsored campaign to reclaim Siam's lost possession, Cambodia occupies only 3 out of 200 pages. Luang Vichit Vathakarn, the author, had full access to official records but in common with most books on the period, his book leaves out altogether the secret Siamese-Cambodian Treaty of December 1863 which was Siam's attempt to cancel France's claim of exclusive protectorate, and which led to a series of stormy negotiations, complete with the presence of a French gunboat as mentioned above.

W.F. Vella's other contention also needs modification. King Mongkut's elaborate network of treaties with the Western powers was a continuation of Rama III's policy of safety in numbers but the purpose behind it was more

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complex. France first gained a foothold in Indo-China in the reign of King Mongkut and Anglo-French rivalry began in earnest, at least between their representatives in Bangkok. Add to that the exaggerated rumours spread by the irresponsible elements among the European communities - the English language press or private individuals who managed to make themselves heard in Siam either through the missionaries or resident merchants - or through King Mongkut's partiality for foreign correspondence and Siam's attempts to play one power against the other became inevitable. Their efforts were rewarded with considerable success, thanks to the notion of oriental court intrigues entertained by the Western representatives referred to earlier. To them the Siamese, king and ministers alike, appeared bent on enlisting any support, even from the foreigners, which would consolidate their position. The Siamese were not slow in taking advantage of this misconception. Consular reports to Paris, for example, tended to be more favourable, giving an impression of more friendly feeling on the part of the Siamese than was actually the case, if a reputedly pro-French minister was in charge of Franco-Siamese affairs. Careful examinations, however, show that if rivalry did exist among the Siamese, in the question of foreign relations they were united by the common fear of Western aggression. In other words, all were pro-Siamese and King Mongkut could rely on their full co-operation to carry out the newly formed policy.

While not losing sight of the profitable game of playing one rival against another, King Mongkut had realised early



that he could not count on the mutual jealousy of the Western powers alone for the safety of his kingdom. He and his ministers had tried to keep in touch with events and the resettlements of colonial territories after the Napoleonic upheavals, especially the withdrawal of the Dutch from the mainland of Malaya in 1824, had prepared them for the Western policy of divided spheres of influence. Strict neutrality continued to be his object, but King Mongkut recognised that a time might come when, in order to avoid total disaster, Siam would have to make a choice, and that it would be a choice of a master, no matter in what less degrading guise she should pretend to call it. This study will attempt to show that although starting with neutrality, or even a preference for France because at his accession Britain was the only interested Western power in the area, circumstances forced King Mongkut to lean more and more on Britain for advice and support, and that before his reign ended he had made it clear that if the unwelcome choice was forced upon Siam, Britain would be the lesser of two evils. The King was influenced by many factors in his choice - language tie, stability, but most important of all, by what he considered to be the comparatively moral attitude of the British Government in London. This is the most important contribution of the reign of King Mongkut to the formation of Siam's foreign policy. To their great credit the King and his advisers were astute enough to distinguish, among the threats and wild rumours, the difference between the attitude



jealousy of the Western kingdom. He and his with events and the s after the Napoleonic of the Dutch from the prepared them for the s of influence. Strict ct, but King Mongkut when, in order to avoid like a choice, and that it o matter in what less o call it. This study will ing with neutrality, or at his accession Britain i power in the area, to lean more and more id that before his reign unwelcome choice was the lesser of two evils. factors in his choice - rtant of all, by what he moral attitude of the is the most important ngkut to the formation at credit the King and distinguish, among the ce between the attitude

of the Westerners' home governments and that of their more aggressive nationals in the East, official representatives and private individuals alike, although they had not correctly divined the considerations influencing the attitudes of the home governments which were economic rather than moral. Their conclusion, however, was a natural sequence to King Mongkut's unflattering ideas of the Western powers. In their eyes, King Mongkut propounded his theory in his inimitable style, the country and people of Asia were no better than animals and vegetables destined for human consumption, the Westerners considering themselves alone as human beings. Since in the policy of divided spheres of influence they had found a new way of satisfying their appetite without getting in each other's way, the Asian nations, unable any longer to rely for their safety on the mutual jealousies of these Western bullies, must turn to work instead on their vanity. In King Mongkut's opinion the aggression of a Western nation could only be halted by moral strictures from its equals, namely other Western powers - hence his policy of bringing Siam, as it were, into the limelight, for if she remained tucked away in the far corner of the earth she would fall a sure prey to the dark deeds of one or the other of the greedy powers. The treaties of commerce and friendship with the West were only the first step of the policy which aimed at establishing contact through which, if need be, Siam could bring her grievances to the attentions of the civilised world. Siam's missions to England and France followed close upon her conclusion of treaties with the two powers and her main object in sending

them was not publicity, which as it turned out they received in full, but permission for direct approach to the governments in London and Paris, in case of distress, over and above the normal contact through the consuls. This object the missions also achieved and in the course of this study it will be seen that the Siamese were justified in their belief that Siam could expect better treatment if her affairs were discussed at a level higher than that of the consulates in Bangkok.

That this was a distinct departure from the policy laid down by Rama III is evident in the Siamese attitude towards the appointment of their representatives abroad. When Sir James Brooke in 1850 asked for a revision of the Burney Treaty of 1826 the most important change which he proposed was the establishment of a British consulate in Bangkok, and as an inducement he made it a reciprocal agreement and invited the Siamese to send consuls to British territories. The Siamese contemptuously rejected the bait and informed Brooke they had no wish to impede foreign governments with the presence of their consuls. At King Mongkut's death in 1868 Siam had consuls not only in the neighbouring British territories, which was all that Brooke had in mind, but also in London and Paris, and these formed the nucleus from which the diplomatic service of Siam has developed.

King Mongkut was a prolific writer - memoranda, private letters, circulars, proclamation etc. Many, though by no means all, of his Siamese writings have been published. Of the published letters, there are six collections. It is the intention of this study to let the King speak for himself whenever possible. His style is inimitable and it is hoped that

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directness. Much of his correspondence, however, was in  
English and this is easily recognizable, for apart from his style  
the King also had his own method of spelling and punctuation,  
and these have been left in their original form.