

Bangkok 1998

THAI

POSTCARD

CENTURY

Chiang Mai

Thailand

THAILAND

BAN

Planting seedling rice

Canal life Thailand

Royal State Barge, Siam

Dear Mr. Phillips
I have just
received your
letter of the 10th
and am very glad
to hear from you.
I am well and hope
this finds you the same.
I am always yours
affectionately
Ethel

N
C
1872
P44
2000
V.2

TOM PHILLIPS

THAI CUSTOM

Street in Bangkok



The Head of Buddha image Wat Pramahathat

Ayutthaya

THAI POSTCARD CENTURY

TOM PHILLIPS

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Barcode 000010009343
Call no. NC1872
P44
2000 V.2
Date 14 October 2022

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INTRODUCTION



Fig. 1



Fig. 1a

It may come as a surprise to any Western reader that one can assemble a hundred year's worth of Thai postcards. As this book can only start to indicate the postcard in Thailand has had as long and as vigorous a career as in most countries of the world.

In the West a whole world of deltiology (to use the quaint American name which gives gravity to the hobby of postcard collecting) has grown up, especially in the last decades of the twentieth century. Principally in Europe and America there is an infrastructure of magazines, regular fairs for buying and selling as well as a shared (and often published) corpus of information. In the East only Japan has recently started, via a handful of enterprising traders, to examine its postcard past.

Although there are serious collectors of cards produced in Thailand or of Thai subject matter, there is as yet no literature. One must begin somewhere if only with an unqualified stranger making a trial sampling and giving his reactions. This may even have its advantages since every country is ordinary and unexotic to itself. Therefore it is often through foreigners that we learn what is remarkable and strange in the places and among the people that we take for granted.

A glance at Fig. 1 will show that right at the beginning of the last century cards of great sophistication were available in Thailand and whoever sent this to Monsieur Labour in Paris from Bangkok must have caused him to raise his eyebrows at its quality and graphic elegance, not to speak of its unusual use of art and photography in combination. As would be the case in any country only the picture side was permitted for messages (in this case brief enough) in the early years of the century.

Two types of card predominate in this period. One, as seen, is the variation on European models with all kinds of vignetting in order to leave space for writing. Germany with its "Gruss Aus" (Greetings From...) cards was the pioneer in this style and the presence in Bangkok of a German-run publishing house Gélte & Co. (who were also book producers) before 1901 must have brought the art of the Siamese card quickly up to date. The existence of a colonial power has something of the same effect in other Asian countries which lacked Siam's jealously guarded independence. The other type of card makes (as it does in many countries) its appearance at the same time when photographic paper already prepared with the regulation (according that is to the Universal Postal Union) postcard back. These cards are what dealers refer to as RP, i.e. Real Photos produced as postcards. These may be unique examples or printed as batches or the standard product of a photographer's studio. In the case of military photos, as in Fig. 2, the presence of a field photographer accompanying manoeuvres must have given rise to a group of postcards which officers could collect or send to friends and family. Cards of more public occasions might have been produced by local photographers or, as in the case of Fig. 3, made into printed series (here from Antonios Studios in Bangkok).

Views in steady demand would of course be printed normally on non-photographic paper as in the card Fig. 4 of the British Club in Bangkok whose lawn seems ready for croquet or cricket or some other sublimely daft British sport. This was produced by the Siam Photo Supply Co. and is neatly relieved of dumbness by the presence of a girl in white and a parasol in black.

Variations on these techniques with the odd occasional graphically produced card continue until the advent of printed rather than tinted colour (many Thai cards that have been photo tinted have not kept anything but a few blotches of pigment) in the thirties and forties. Thailand being a colourful country the advent of four colour printing precipitated a sharp and terminal decline in black and white views (which in Europe persisted well into the sixties).

Tourism on a large scale made full colour printing viable. The larger publishing houses in Bangkok and elsewhere like Phorn Pith and Supla Thai produced, often to a very high standard, endless images of temples and picturesque rurality in huge editions. Image experiments were not called for and the standard views of famous monuments rapidly became clichés. This is so in every country and it is the business of collecting in all fields to find the special and interesting card, even in unpromising categories. The dance theatre of Thailand is well known and today represented on many cards by coy maidens looking all too folkloric. On a card posted in 1910 showing an episode from The Story of the Conch quite a different level of intensity is apparent (Fig. 5).

As the only country in South East Asia never to have been colonised the History of Siam/Thailand is remarkably self contained. The correspondence abroad by Thai people themselves is numerically outweighed by that of visitors, though many Thai, even in the early years of the century, were educated abroad as can be seen by the to and fro of messages from cadet schools in Germany etc. Young aristocrats were sent to Europe to study in a military tradition in order to take up posts of responsibility on their return. One historic printed card posted from Switzerland in 1907 lies beyond this pattern in that it shows the King of Siam on European soil meeting Bismarck (Fig. 6).



Fig. 2 29th March 1914. The second in a series of cards sent to Prince Chula by an army captain in which he described military manoeuvres. Evidently the young Prince declared his interest or was at least diplomatic in his reply for he receives a further card (with crude traces of tinting), *This picture was taken when we were engaged in military manoeuvres in Makhon Chaisri. The Commander and his officers are planning their strategy in order to attack the 'enemy' watched over by the supervisory committee.* The costumes have a distinct Erich von Stroheim look.

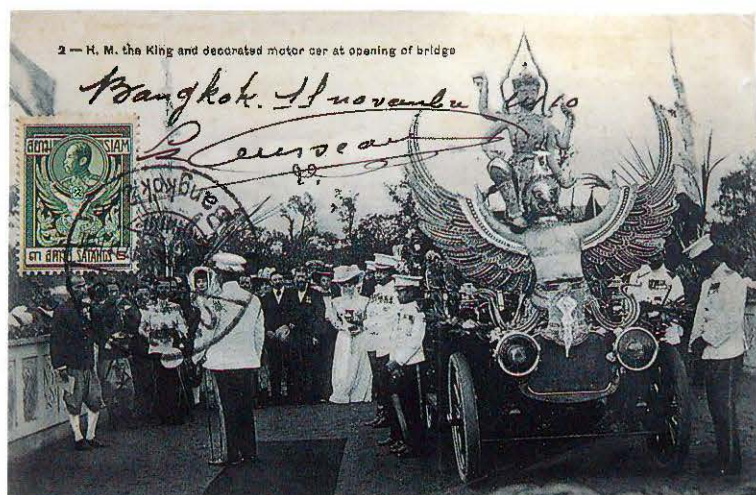


Fig. 3



Fig. 4

With few exceptions Thai messages tend to be as conventional as this Swiss greeting and the outside world beyond friendships and family intimacy do not impinge on them. This is far from true of course of the later visitors though many of the backpackers of the eighties and nineties have their own ways of being self-centred, treating a new and strange country as if it had been erected the night before as a theme park for them (with a convenient pub or McDonalds). A similar crop of European cards would give throughout a century, at least by implication, some sense of a wider world as demonstrated by Woly in her message to M. George in Paris.

Nonetheless this gathering of postcards does represent in some way almost every year of the century (with an understandable gap in the Second World War years of Japanese occupation). Time will treat these cards more kindly until even Pat Phong will look quaintly nostalgic. The lotus eaters will move on towards another beach not yet spoilt by them. Modern life will find its way on to postcards. Meanwhile the collectors will gather the material of the past and collate the nation's story via its postcard images, perhaps spurred on by the very interim nature of this report itself.



Fig. 7



Fig. 8a

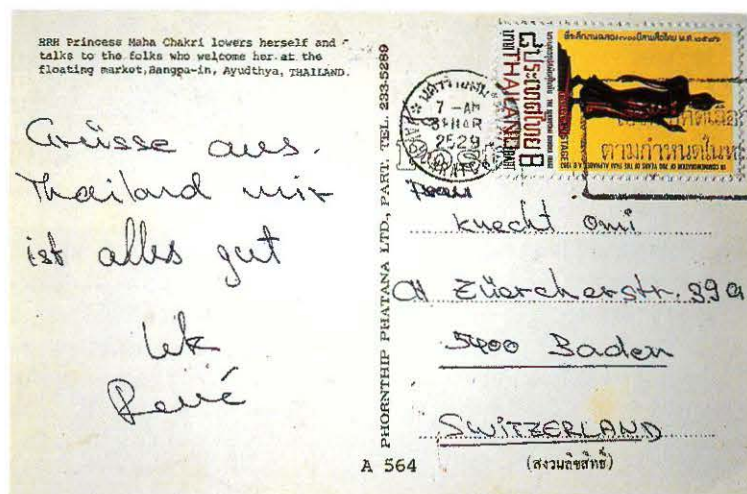


Fig. 7a

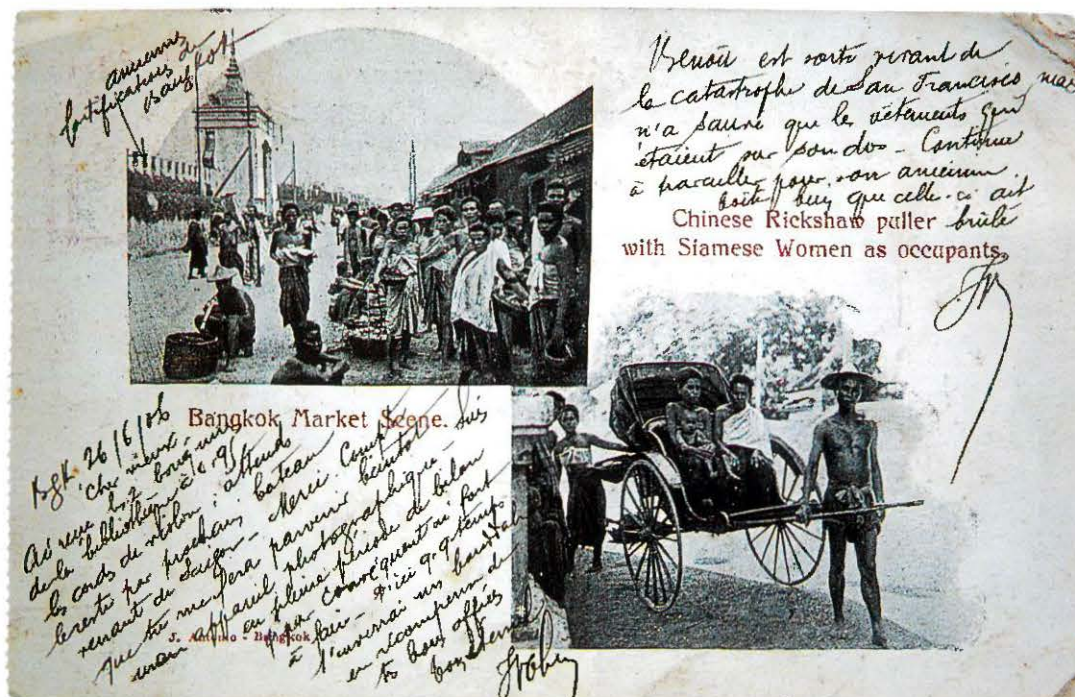


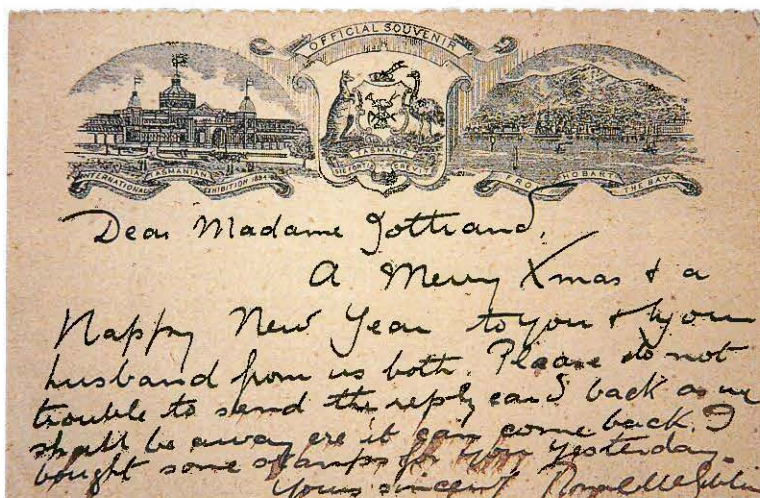
Fig. 8

The 1900s



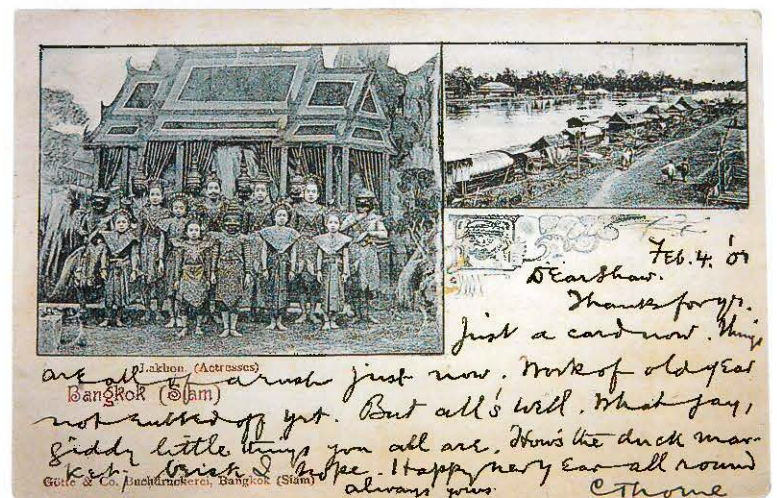
April 8th 1902. E N sends a card showing Queen Saowabha in a court variant of traditional Thai costume to Mlle. Pabrilard in Haute Savoie. She does not use the message space provided in the art nouveau framing of the portrait. Both the graphic style and the portrait manner are European; the pose of the young Queen and even the props reflect every portrait cliché that photography had borrowed from painting.

1902



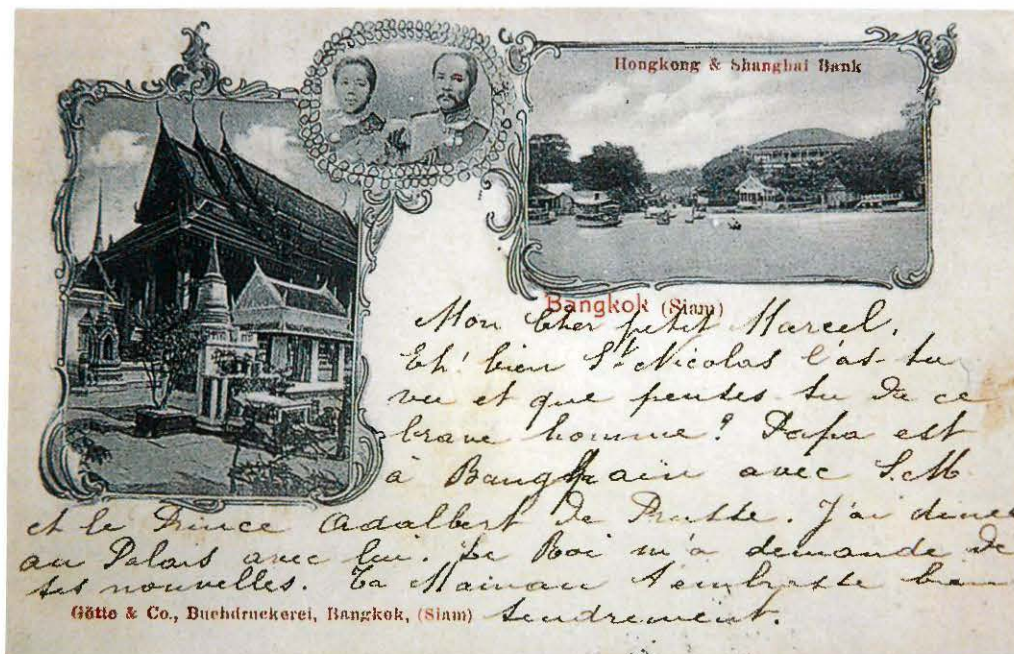
December 1st 1900. A Tasmanian card to a French sounding lady (complete with Queen Victoria on the stamp) is an odd way to start a book on Thai postcards. Cards produced in Thailand itself are extremely rare at the turn of the century yet the writer seem to indicate some sort of postcard exchange had taken place. Please do not trouble to send the reply card back as we shall be away ere it can come back.

1900



February 4th 1901. C Thome in Bangkok writes to S L Shaw Esq. in London, *Thanks for yrs. just a card now things are all of a rush just now. Work or old year not rubbed off yet. But all's well. What gay, giddy little things you all are. how's the duck market; brisk I hope. Happy New Year all round.* The style of card is characteristic of the time and significantly, though printed in Thailand, it is the product of a German publisher. Many British and American cards were (up to the First World War) printed in Germany.

1901



December 8th 1904. Marcel Reytyer (grandson of a former physician to King Rama V) in Brussels receives an elegant multi-view card of Bangkok including the Royal couple, *Dear little Marcel. Well, ST Nicolas is with us and what do you think of that stout fellow? Daddy is in Bangkok with Sello (?) and Prince Adalbert of Prussia. I danced at the Palace with him. The King asks about you. Your mother, I hope, accepts our greetings too...* Bangkok's German printer/publisher makes an ornate set of art nouveau frames. 1903

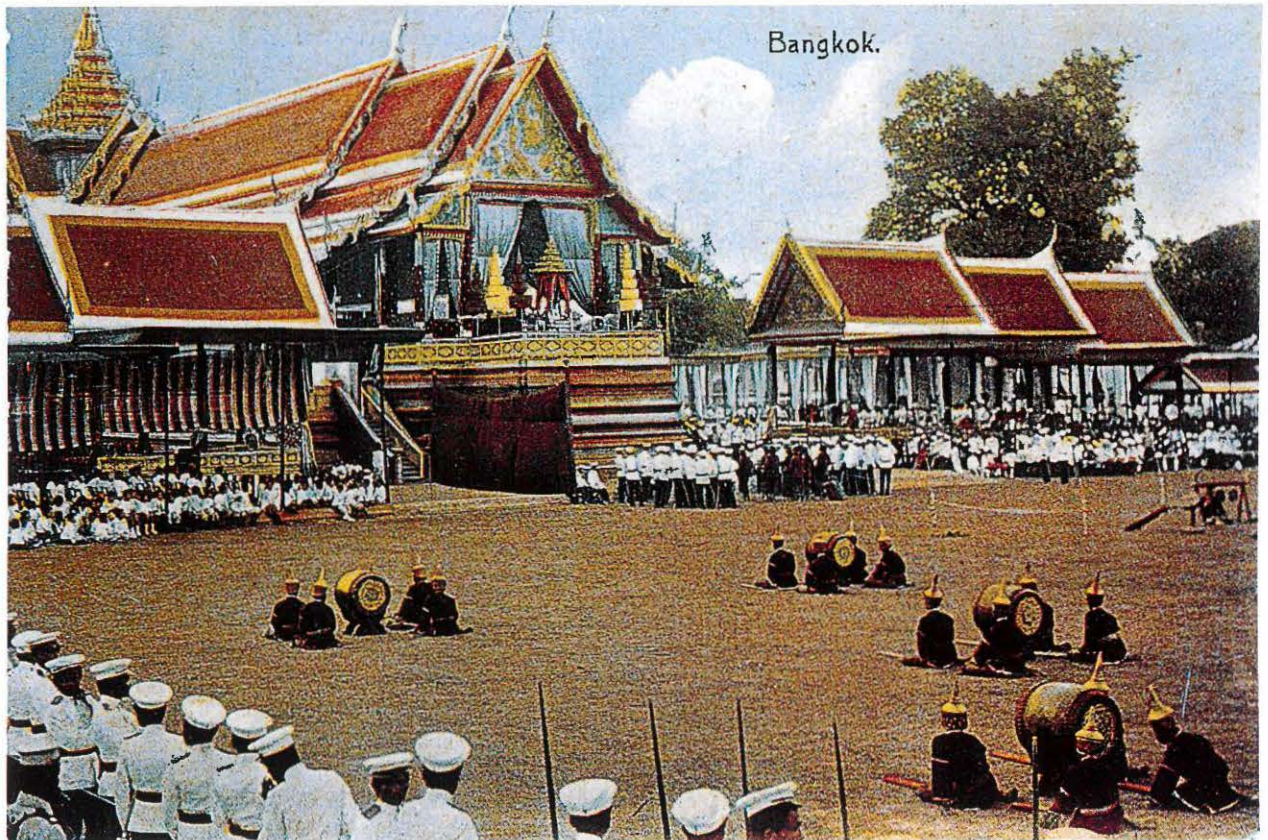


April 24th 1903. Daeng in Bangkok (the nickname of Prince Mahidol) writes to his brother Prince Chakrabongse in St Petersburg (at the Legation), *I have received your pc of the Neva River. It looks very beautiful. I think of you a great deal. Daeng.* The artist draws in a style ultimately derived from Chinese models as can be seen in the landscape foreground though the dancing figure is in a more indigenous manner. 1904



29th August 1905. TT (Prince Tuktawin Sukhasvasti) in Bangkok to Prince Trithipetpong Devakula in Berlin, *This is a pc of Marie in the play of TPS, do you recognise it. Tell me whether it is beautiful or not?* A lost world of courtly amateur theatricals is summoned up by this photograph where everything is in the Western mode. It was quite customary for men to play the women's roles. Who was the playwright TSP? 1905

The 1910s



June 13th 1910. To Nai Sa-Art, still with the officer Cadet School in Berlin, *Father has received your letter. Soon he will write and tell you all the news. This photo shows the ceremonies in the old capital with the Sri Sanphet throne hall modelled on the ancient ruins. La-or Kasem.* The heightened colours of the card emphasise the potent mix of ethnic influences and the juncture of ancient and modern. 1910



July 1st 1911. To Nai Sa-Art, still in Berlin but now at Osterfor Str. *Dear older brother... I haven't written much recently because I've been so busy. I am now working at the Supreme Court. Prince Svasti brought me in. Everyone at home is well. La-or Kasem.* This is an early view of New Road on what was perhaps, in its own time, a busy day. 1911



November 12th 1912. Prince Purachatra, sends a photographic postcard to Prince Chakrabongse in Bangkok, *A photo of the Kathin procession to Wat Mondop sponsored by Queen Saowabha.* The procession is part of an elaborate ceremony in which Buddhist monk's robes were donated by the royal family. It seems that everyone with a boat was welcome, in some way, to join in. 1912



March 11th 1915. To Prince Chula Chakrabongse in Bangkok from Phraya Prasit-Suppakarn, *I haven't seen you for such a long time. I think about you a lot so I have sent you a picture of myself on horseback. I'm sure you will like it as you are in the First Cavalry Regiment.* The prince in fact is only an infant but his father has had miniature uniforms made for him. The corner of the card has been chewed, a fate common as damp in old Thai cards. 1915



Prince Chakrabongse receives a card from the northern province of Lampang from his uncle, Prince Bhanurangsi, *This is the last day of travel by elephant and horses, I want to let you know I am thinking of you. I like this picture because of the fancy dress we wore in Chiang Mai in the Northern style.* Evidently only one of this group is in fancy dress. 1913



March 4th 1914. Prince Chula Chakrabongse is staying in Hua Hin a select early version of a Thai seaside resort and receives a card from Bangkok, *Here the soldiers have spread out to seize the railway line. If you are interested I will send you some more... I hope you like them and send you my thoughts.* Army manoeuvres are army manoeuvres. 1914



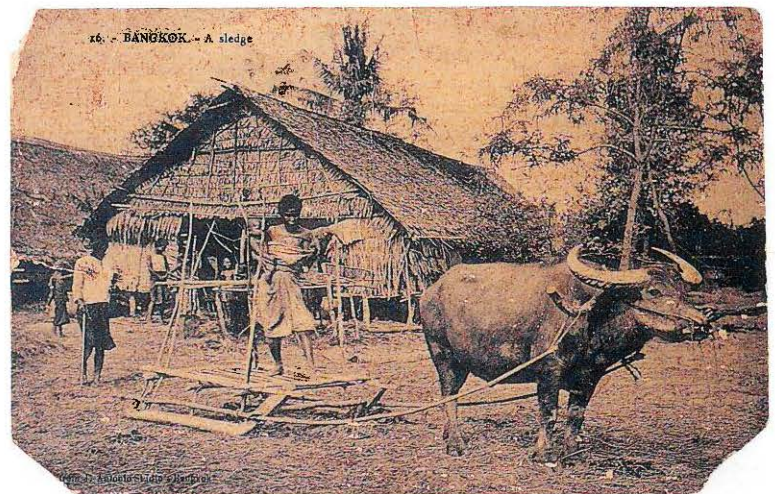
Postmarked 'Miniature Navy, 1916 From Prince Purachattra to Prince Chakrabongse, *Tonight we have changed our outfits so they are more like combat dress. We will wear them for two sets and the second outfit in sets 1 and 2. I remain your obedient servant.* Prince Purachattra in army uniform is drawing a 7 1/4 gauge model steam engine in a theatre of houses and a bridge while another loco waits behind the pasteboard trees. Such a railway and rolling stock (from Basset-Lowke in England) is a luxury import indeed. 1916



February 25th 1918. K B Sieng of the Borneo Co. In Bangkok has entered into exchange of stamps and cards with Mr Philip H Ward Jr. of Philadelphia, USA, *Your letter reached me safely and I hope to send you my stamps as soon as possible. This picture shows the natives of Karen of North Siam, their dresses not alike Siamese. Yours Truly.* Although the whole of Thailand to the Westerner seems exotic it is always interesting to note how Thailand has its own internal brand of otherness as can be seen from the many ethnographic-style pictures of Hill Tribe people. 1918

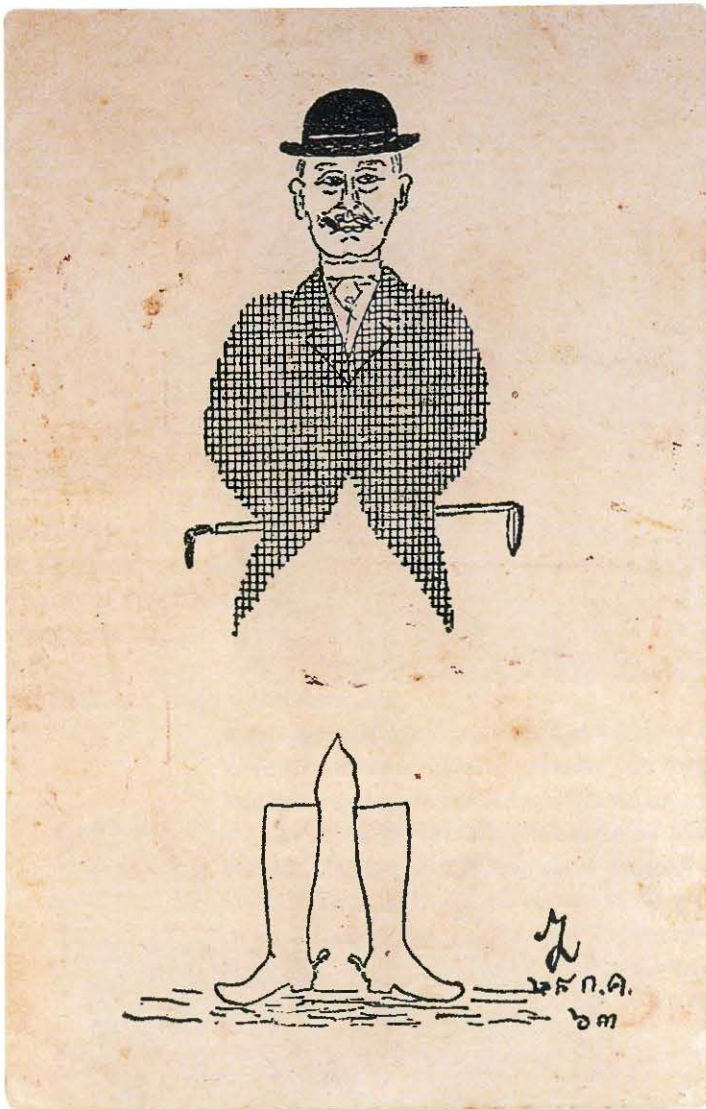


Anon sends a fully tinted card of a postman to Prince Chakrabongse. The post-box (pictured in 1912) seems strangely modelled on the standard English type with the embossed coat of arms in the same place. The red pillar box is one of the enduring legacies of English influence and can be found all over the world. The postman however is very much in the idiom of the country. 1917



August 17th. To Prince Nidasanadhorn Chirapavati in Bangkok, *To my youngest nephew. I'm staying at the farm and so I'm sending you a picture of a water buffalo ploughing. I think of you a lot, Prince Pittiyalap.* The writer's description seems more convincing that the caption on this maimed card which has nonetheless been kept for over three quarters of a century. 1919

The 1920s



July 1920. King Rama VI sends Princess Laksami Lavan a postal card on which he has drawn, it seems, the official riding habit, very much in the English style, *I'm writing to you from Ban Pong Camp to ask for your news and to tell you I'm thinking of you. I think I might change the riding hats and hope they'll look good. They can be worn by either men or women.* Such rash leaps of ethnicity were not of course reciprocated by the West. The Princess was the King's fiancée but he later changed his mind. 1920



April 4th 1922. Prince Chula Chakrabongse (who had been sent to England to study) receives in his glum exile this aerial view of Bangkok with its appropriate message, *In January went up in a plane and had a good view of the city. We look off from Don Muang and flew to Khorat as part of the Chief of Staff's party. You couldn't have been further from Thailand than Ashington Rectory in Rochford, Essex.* The production of the card, even the lettering of its title, is in a similar style to that of the French publisher LL. 1922



August 1921. The sender writes on a card of himself and a friend at Angkor Wat, *On 25th August the Senabadi died. Palad Toonchalong has taken over.* A stiffly posed group. One is intrigued as to who the man in the white suit and bow tie might be and what part he plays. 1921