

# Transformation of Bangkok in the Press During the Reign of Rama V (1868 - 1910)

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## Abstract

This essay describes the emerging public discourse on Bangkok's urban and architectural transformations in print media from the reign of Rama V. It discusses and compares different representations and visions of the civilizing city that were architected by three groups of publishing elites: the royal elite, the commoner intellectuals, and the Westerners.

In April 1869, the *Siam Repository* had printed an editorial article titled "Bangkok, Siam. As It Is." The *Repository*'s editor was an American missionary, Samuel J. Smith, and the first half of the article was a typical description of the capital city of this "heathen country." The flat deltaic landscape and its extensive waterways were duly noted, together with the princely palaces, the profuse vegetation, and the multitudes of people.

The latter half of the article, however, represented nothing less than one of the earliest calls for a systematic planning of Bangkok, the growing city that "is being rapidly built up with substantial brick dwellings, especially on the king's road and vicinity." Smith then listed the questions he thought were most pertinent to the city's improvements:

Where do we in Bangkok propose to have market street a hundred years hence? Where do we propose to have the beautiful river residences? What parts are to be given up for traffic in wholesale? Where are to be the big warehouses and the din of trade? And where the forts that are to give defence? Where the great parade ground for the military department? Where the Academic halls? Where the state buildings in which rulers and judges are to make laws and dispense justice? Where those necessary buildings that require most thought of all, that are to provide for the sick, the sentenced and the unfortunate?<sup>2</sup>

Only with faith in God, good work, and modern town planning, Smith argued, "the city would grow up strong and beautiful, and become e'er long a beautiful thrifty place for trade, and a growing thrifty country in every department." He envisioned the city "laid out into building squares, with fine broad streets," which, if implemented right away, "would save a deal of trouble in after time, in pulling down the old to make improvements." Smith then imagined the walled part of the city overlaid with brick-paved streets, fine residences for the Siamese elite, and substantial masonry-built stores, with the Thonburi side reserved as residential area for the native population. Bangkrak should be turned into a foreign enclave called "Consulate Squares," while the port area further south should naturally become bustling with business and industrial activities.

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<sup>2</sup> *Siam Repository*, April 1869, 107.



## The City and the Press

Since mid-nineteenth century, Bangkok's semi-aquatic urban landscape had begun to turn into a land-based one, starting with king Rama IV's street projects: Charoenkrung (1861), Bam-rungmuang, and Fuangnakhon (1863).<sup>3</sup> By the time Rama V ascended to the throne in 1868, his capital city was already a city in transition. Changes in the urban landscape, however, were gradual, as road construction was costly and maintenance was difficult. Waterways still dominated the urban landscape, and Smith's 1869 editorial article was indeed a visionary one in its time. Towards the end of Rama V's reign, however, Bangkok would actually transform, its canals turned into brick-paved streets lined with arcaded shophouses not unlike those in Smith's vision. The new streets provided the urban populace with a new sense of public space in their rigid geometry and the new modes of transportation, from bicycles to carriages and tramways.

Simultaneously, another sense of public space was beginning to emerge through the city's print media. When Smith's article was published, there were already five newspapers in Bangkok—one in Thai, and four in English.<sup>4</sup> With

the steady increase in population and the rise of literacy, the reign of king Rama V (1868-1910) would be marked with no less than seventeen newspapers with regular run.<sup>5</sup> Through the advent of the press, the urban populace was exposed to ideas and information pertaining to the transformation of their newly built environment. Newspapers would increasingly become the site of wide-ranging public discourse which encompassed not only questions about the city's planning and regulation, but also issues such as the new modes of urban transport, or the appropriate etiquette for using the new spaces.

Admittedly, newspaper publication in late-nineteenth-century Bangkok was still an entirely elite undertaking, and the "public" discourse on the pages of *The Bangkok Times* or *Tunlawiphak-photchanaikit* cannot be seen as the nationwide debate in the sense of Benedict Anderson's "imagined community."<sup>6</sup> However, one might argue that the newspaper and magazine articles are the first manifestation of an emerging, modern "public" which first appeared in the upper echelons of the urban social structure. Consequently, in this essay I would like to describe and discuss the tropes of public discourse from three late-nineteenth century

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<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive summary of Bangkok's urban transformation, with particular attention to its economy and the street constructions, see Porphant Ouyyanont (1999). "Physical and Economic Change in Bangkok, 1851-1925." *Southeast Asian Studies* 36(4): 437-474.

<sup>4</sup> Sukanya Tirawanit (1977) *Prawatkan nangsuphim nai Prathet Thai phaitai rabop somburanayasitthirat* [History of Thai Newspapers under Absolute Monarchy Regime, 1782-1932]. Bangkok: Thai Watthana Phanit. 25.

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<sup>5</sup> Nakharin Mektrairat (1997) *Kanpatiwat Sayam Pho. So. 2475* [Siamese Revolution, 1932]. Bangkok: Amarin. 104.

<sup>6</sup> Benedict R. O'G. Anderson (1991) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso. For an excellent study of the Thai press and its sociocultural context in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, see Barmé, Scot (2002) *Woman, Man, Bangkok: Love, Sex, and Popular Culture in Thailand*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc.



publications, *Wachirayanwiset*, *Tunlawiphakphotchanakit*, and *The Bangkok Times*, each of which represents the voice of a subgroup within Bangkok's elite social class: the royal elite, the commoner intellectuals, and the Westerners. Issues relating to the transformations in urban and architectural spaces in Rama V's Bangkok will be specifically selected for discussion.

### Wachirayanwiset

Published by Wachirayan Library, the elite institution founded by Rama V in memory of his father, *Wachirayanwiset* was a weekly magazine that ran from 1886 to 1894.<sup>7</sup> Contributed by members of Rama V's court, *Wachirayanwiset*'s articles consisted mainly of feature essays, literary pieces, and light-hearted debates on contemporary issues. The feature essays were often articles describing elements of the everyday urban life, the subject of which must have been of ethnographic interest to the elite audience who lived their lives quite apart from the general populace. "On Laundry Business," for example, described in detail the history of this profession, "recently greatly proliferated in Bangkok due to the widespread use of Western-style shirts in recent styles of clothing."<sup>8</sup> After listing the names and locations of all sixteen laundry establishments in the city, the author discussed such thing as laundry operation, types of implements, and the personnel needed to run a laundry shop in 1891. Similar articles included feature essays on pawnshops, gambling dens,

omnibuses, and horse-drawn tramways, all of which expressed their authors' marveled attitudes toward the new urban phenomena.<sup>9</sup>

Another type of writing that appeared in *Wachirayanwiset* was the didactic essay on modern etiquette and customs. In "Entering an Office," for example, Prince Sommotamonphan described the appropriate manners one should adopt in moving through "the spaces which the Westerners called 'office,' dealing mainly with paperwork, either in governmental or commercial sectors."<sup>10</sup> Office space was indeed quite new to the Siamese, as business offices began to appear in Bangkok with the expansion of trade after the 1855 Bowring Treaty, while most of the governmental offices were created only after the 1888 bureaucratic reforms. Western manners were indeed the norm for the new, civilized spaces, at least for the Siamese elite, as another article, "Western Etiquettes," clearly put:

Since in the present time, Siamese elite and Western ones, both men and women, have increasingly fraternized with each other. It is hoped that reading this essay on the etiquettes of the Western peoples is not wasteful of the

<sup>7</sup> Sukanya, Prawatkan nangsuphim nai Prathet Thai phaitai rabop somburanaya-sithirath. 41.

<sup>8</sup> *Wachirayanwiset*, April 2, 1891.

<sup>9</sup> *Wachirayanwiset*, August 18, 1889; August 13, 1890; January 14, 1891. *Wachirayan*, a monthly sister publication, also featured similar articles in the "Conversation with" series, such as "Conversation with a Rickshaw Coolie," *Wachirayan*, January 1894; "Conversation with a Typist," *Wachirayan*, May 1895; and "Conversation with an Opium Addict," *Wachirayan*, July 1895.

<sup>10</sup> *Wachirayanwiset*, April 13, 1893.



Wachirayan Library members' time.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, a *Wachirayanwiset* feature, which neatly captured the transformative characteristic of its time, was the popular *Panha phayakon* [Prediction Question] section. In this part, the subscribers would send in their predictive replies to the editors' short questions on the future of various elements in the Siamese urban life: "Whether Floating Houses Would Increase or Decrease," "Would There Be More Carriages Than Boats," "If Thatched Roofs Would Be Replaced by Tiled Roofs," and "Canals Versus Roads."<sup>12</sup> A reader under the pseudonym "A Member," for example, gave his prediction that the number of floating houses would decrease due to the wakes made by steamboats, among other reasons.<sup>13</sup> Another reader, "Road-Rover", seconded this opinion by calculating the cost of constructing a floating house, which turned out to be relatively high in comparison with the price of one of the new shophouses. "One can sleep on the top floor of the shophouse with the windows open for a cool breeze, which European physicians say contributes to one's longevity. Hence, in the future floating house dwellers will disembark and move into the brick-built shophouses instead."<sup>14</sup> The city would be much more beautiful and well-ordered, the author concluded, if it consisted of streets lined with masonry structures instead of the disorderly floating houses.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Wachirayanwiset, July 12, 1894.

<sup>12</sup> Wachirayanwiset, November 27, 1890; January 28, 1891; November 12, 1891; September 8, 1892.

<sup>13</sup> Wachirayanwiset, November 27, 1890.

<sup>14</sup> Wachirayanwiset, December 4, 1890.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

## Tunlawiphakphotchanakit

Visions of the future Bangkok, together with the appreciation of the recent urban transformation, were advanced by the commoner-intellectual Thianwan (T. W. S. Wannapho, 1842-1915).<sup>16</sup> One of the very few Siamese intellectuals outside the royal elite circle, Thianwan was among the first educated commoners who had adopted and adapted Western lifestyle and modes of thought. His ultramodern ideas were actually not really idiosyncratic but a product of his age; some of them were still discussed and debated well after his time.<sup>17</sup>

Thianwan expressed his seemingly futuristic thoughts on social reforms through self-published pamphlets, books, and magazines. *Tunlawiphakphotchanakit* was one of the latter, issued monthly from 1900 to 1906. The condition of the built environment, Thianwan argued, was indicative of the society's nature, just as the characteristics of an animal's nest can help one deduce its behavior.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, in his essay on proper living, Thianwan expressed his belief in the correlation between familial order and domestic space: "If the kitchen or the entire house is cleaned and well-ordered, either the mother or the daughter of the family must be capable of keeping a good household, which is evident in the order of the house."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Barmé, Scot (2002) *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, 17.

<sup>17</sup> Barmé, Scot (2002) *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, 23.

<sup>18</sup> *Tunlawiphakphotchanakit*, June 1901. "On Experimentation."

<sup>19</sup> *Tunlawiphakphotchanakit*, September 1905.



According to Thianwan, European civilization was the trope of modernity, although direct importation or mimicry would not work, as the Siamese cultural roots differed greatly from the Western.<sup>20</sup> Although he was quite satisfied with modern Bangkok, with its European-style schools, hospitals, orphanage, insane asylum, courthouse, barrack, ministries, foundries, roads, railroads, and tramways, Thianwan also noted some of modernity's darker aspects, such as crime, or the higher cost of living.<sup>21</sup>

In a 1904 article, "On Dreaming Without Sleeping," Thianwan articulated his thirty-four ideas for the future of Siam. Some of these were truly innovative, such as the idea of a warship, a floating "school for all important subjects, complete with printing and photographic machines", which would take the brightest Siamese youths on a year-long semester overseas. For the city of Bangkok, Thianwan envisioned an extensive network of "walking streets, carriageways, and railways, within Bangkok and beyond," for government business and transportation.<sup>22</sup> In addition, he also imagined a large police force to maintain civil order, together with a census survey for municipal purposes.

Finally, in a 1905 article, "On Era or Time," in which he outlined yet another twenty-two ideas for Siam's immediate present and its future, Thianwan emphasized how social unity was key to a society's stability and civilization. He also postulated the idea of the common interest, an ideal which should

be shared by all strata of the society, which was indeed quite ahead of its time.<sup>23</sup>

## The Bangkok Times

Started in 1886, *The Bangkok Times* was an English-language newspaper, which ran without interruption until 1895. Its editorial articles and "locals" items frequently addressed urban issues of contemporary Bangkok from the perspective of the Englishmen who ran the editorial board to its readers, which were both European and Siamese. In retrospect, the *Times*' editorials represented nothing less than the repeated call for a systematic planning of the city of Bangkok. According to the *Times*, urban order and sanitation by Western standards were to be achieved through legislation, regulation, and planning. Using journalistic techniques, the *Times* always presented its plans for improving Bangkok in connection with the news of the day. For example, on February 18, 1888, the *Times* gave a long report on "a great fire" in Thonburi, which destroyed three hundred houses and a hundred-thousand-baht-worth lumberyard.<sup>24</sup> In the following issue it ran an editorial article, titled "Rebuilding Bangkok":

We trust that our Local Committee, ever watchful for the improvement of Bangkok, will not allow houses burnt down in the late fire to be rebuilt at haphazard, without any plan or conformity either to symmetry or to sanitary laws. It is only too common for the natives, immediately after a fire,

<sup>20</sup> Tunlawiphakphotchanakit, July 1904.

<sup>21</sup> Tunlawiphakphotchanakit, March 1904.

<sup>22</sup> Tunlawiphakphotchanakit, December 1904.

<sup>23</sup> Tunlawiphakphotchanakit, July 16, 1905.

<sup>24</sup> The Bangkok Times, February 18, 1888.



to commence to rebuilding their houses on the exact model of the one destroyed, paying little or no attention to sanitation or to whether their habitation stands in the way of a road, blocks up a lane, or otherwise obstructs circulation.<sup>25</sup>

A simple law on after-fire rebuilding, the *Times* argued, would gradually turn Bangkok into a city of well-laid streets, with healthy and habitable quarters. The reordering of the urban fabric would be financed by the sale of lands, which would increase in value after rebuilding.

A week later another editorial article appeared. Titled "Possible Improvements in Bangkok," it was practically a comprehensive plan for Bangkok, 1888. After reiterating the importance of civic order and sanitation, the *Times* gave a quick review of the present state of urban affairs:

We regret that a few Government officials seem to think that no radical reform is necessary, but that all we need to do is to make spasmodic efforts in the way of improvements here and there in the city... [It] is our conviction that if the present Municipal system is to last, Bangkok thirty years hence will be hardly distinguishable from what it is now.<sup>26</sup>

In preparing Bangkok to be planned, the *Times* stated, the city "requires to be carefully surveyed, with special regards to the improvements that are needed

therein, and that must become familiar to the public mind, to the princes, and to His Majesty, before they will ever be carried out." The envisioned result was a city with extensive and well-regulated street networks and with rapid land transport on both sides of the river, and "we might possibly expect, in time, to also see a bridge span both sides of that noble stream."<sup>27</sup>

Although the bridge across the Chaophraya would not be realized until some decades later, parts of the *Times*' vision of Bangkok would turn into reality by the end of the nineteenth century. In November 1888, Luang Sathonrachayut, an ethnic Chinese businessman, began his real estate development project south of the city with the construction of a new canal flanked by carriage roads. With a recent editorial article on a housing shortage in Bangkok, the *Times* proclaimed that the project would, "form one of the healthiest and most picturesque sites in Bangkok for European residences, where one can retreat after a hard day's work and pass a few uninterrupted hours of thorough ease, reveling in the *dolce far niente* of a sequestered abode."<sup>28</sup> In July the following year, the *Times* also reported "the last lot of ground out of the available sites for building [on Sathon Road] was sold to Pra Phree Pitsalee for Ticals 1,550."<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

In this essay I have tried to describe different visions of late nineteenth - and early twentieth-century Bangkok, as reflected through the pages of some of

<sup>25</sup> The Bangkok Times, February 22, 1888.

<sup>26</sup> The Bangkok Times, February 29, 1888.

<sup>27</sup> The Bangkok Times, *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> The Bangkok Times, November 21, 1888.

<sup>29</sup> The Bangkok Times, July 31, 1889.



the era's newspapers. The growth and decline of the city, the advent of new technologies, the consolidation of monarchic power, the threat of colonialism, and the lure of Western material culture, all helped shape these visions into their respective configurations. All three publications seemed to share a common enthusiasm with things new and Western, as civilization was the catchphrase of the day, and to civilize was to Westernize. Furthermore, transformation of urban and architectural space were similarly conceived to be of particular importance.

For the elite readers of *Wachirayanwiset*, however, to be civilized was to maintain their social hegemony, while for perhaps some of Thianwan's readers, its meaning might be entirely different. *Wachirayanwiset* authors might take a lighthearted, uncritical stand, while Thianwan and the *Times*' editors charged forward with critical assessments and visions for the city. This suggests that while the envisioning of Bangkok around the turn of the twentieth century was a collective effort of the elite social groups of the city, each group might articulate different visions and motivations for remaking and experiencing the city.

By the 1920s, Bangkok was already so transformed, and a visitor declared that its epithet "Venice of the East" was no longer appropriate.<sup>30</sup> Also changed was the press, which had blossomed into a far more inclusive forum for public debates on issues pertaining to the city, and otherwise.

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<sup>30</sup> Döhring, Karl (1923; 2000) *Buddhistische Tempelanlagen in Siam*. Bangkok: White Lotus. 5.