

BOOK REVIEW

Bangkok Modern: The Transformation of Bangkok With Singapore and Batavia as Models (1861-1897)

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Reviewed by John Barnes

This volume is derived from the author's doctoral dissertation which sought to clarify that the development of Bangkok under the reigns of King Mongkut and King Chulalongkorn began from developments in Singapore and Batavia rather than from European models. The volume is produced on acid resistant slightly yellow paper in order to have less impact on the environment during its production.

The volume of 198 pages comprises a Table of Contents, List of Tables, List of Maps, a Foreword, a Preface, Acknowledgements and an Abstract. The book comprises four chapters and features reproductions of black and white photographs from antiquity.

The author of this book review previously published a book review on the influence of Italian Architects, Builders and Artisans in the court of Siam during the reign of King Mongkut and King Chulalongkorn so arrival of this book provides an interesting and informative counterpoint to my earlier review.

Chapter 1 Introduction. Briefly reminds us that the era covered by the two reigns was a period when European powers sought to colonize this region. Burma, Singapore Malaysia and Hong Kong had already been colonized under the British. France was in the process of colonizing Cambodia and Laos and in-fact fought a brief war with Thailand in order to do so.

This author and others have informed us that both King Mongkut and King Chulalongkorn believed that in order to stave off these colonizing powers, Thailand needed to quickly modernize its form of government and built environment to resemble the developed countries of Europe.

Khun Udomporn (the author) informs us that both Kings sent representatives to both Singapore and Batavia which had been colonized by the British and the Dutch respectably. Upon their return, plans based on those locations were drawn up to redevelop Bangkok.

King Chulalongkorn also visited both cities and upon his return to Thailand he ordered that redevelopment be carried out speedily.

Chapter 2. Historical Background in the Nineteenth Century:

This chapter covers the change from the old corvée trade system and introduction of the new market-based trade system. Civilization and modernization to the new world standard, involved paved roads and some pedestrian pavements, clean drinking water supplies, drainage and sewage systems, gas street lighting and later electric lighting.

Chapter 3 The Emergence of Modern Bangkok

This chapter covers both the aspects of the built environment and the development of the government bureaucracy, the provision of western style medical facilities, a hospital and the development of western style education at the primary level.

King Chulalongkorn sent his sons to various European countries such as England, France, Germany and Russia in order that they return to Thailand and be capable of establishing and administering the new form of government required of a developed country.

Chapter 4 Bangkok and its Transformation: City of Beauty Hygiene and Order

This chapter opens with a map of Bangkok as it was in 1901 and is supported by copies of numerous black and white photographs of buildings and scenes of that era.

King Mongkut worked with the new bureaucracy to draft regulations and have them policed in order to improve sanitary conditions in the city as it continued to grow in both population and area. Saronrom Park was developed behind the Saronrom Palace based on British gardens by Mr. Henry Alabaster and remains as beautiful today as when it was built. Western style brick and mortar double-storey shop-houses, modelled on those in Singapore and Batavia, were built along Asadaeng Road which itself was built from the soil removed in constructing Ku Muang Derm klong.

Readers are sure to enjoy reading this book whether for academic or historical interest. A copy is on back order at our library. A visit to this area was made by our TRM MBA students last year as part of their tourism and travel writing and journalism class with Ajarn Chin.