

KING MONGKUT OF SIAM AND HIS TREATY WITH BRITAIN

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When Sir John Bowring sailed up the river to Bangkok in March 1855 he was asked by King Mongkut not to fire a salute lest the citizens be alarmed. Sir John, Governor of Hong Kong and Her Majesty's Plenipotentiary in the Far East, reluctantly agreed to postpone the ceremonial explosion from the *Rattler's* guns until the anxious citizens had been given one day's warning.

The Siamese had cause for concern. The Burmese, their traditional enemies, had been conquered by the British; and a dozen years before the Bowring mission the great Chinese Empire had been defeated by the British navy. On their eastern frontier, the Siamese watched with alarm the French encroachment on Cochin-China and their own dominion of Cambodia. To the south of the Isthmus of Kra British power was spreading into the Malay States, including Kedah, a feudatory of Siam. But their fears were to prove unfounded. The Bowring mission to Bangkok was completely successful for both British and Siamese. On April 18th, 1855, a Treaty of Friendship and Commerce was signed, an agreement which was to secure for Siam, alone in south-east Asia, independence from colonial rule and which set her on the long, painful road of modernisation.

Force had been used to 'open' China. In the same year as Bowring's peaceful mission to Bangkok Commodore Perry's American warships were demanding commerce and navigation rights of the Japanese. Even after the Treaty of Nanking had

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opened the Treaty Ports and a second British conflict with China had proved the superiority of Western arms, the Chinese court refused to reform. The Japanese were quicker to read the signs. Only Siam, unlike her weak neighbours in the tropical south, was able to adapt herself to the new world without war or its threat and without loss of sovereignty.

Why was this? Was it because Britain and France had agreed to the Thai kingdom being a buffer between their Indian and Indo-Chinese empires? Or was it that the King of Siam who received Sir John Bowring had more vision than most of his Asian contemporaries and was succeeded by an equally gifted son? Whatever the reasons, the Treaty of 1855 was a major factor in determining the future of the Thai kingdom. It provided for the opening of diplomatic relations with Britain and, as a natural consequence, with other western nations. It introduced extra-territorial rights to British subjects living in Siam and allowed them to own or rent property. In commerce the Treaty abolished the strangling system of monopolies — owned by the King and 'farmed' to Chinese merchants — replacing it by a free market with low duties on imports and exports. The year after the conclusion of the British treaty the Americans and the French secured similar agreements and these in turn were hastily followed by treaties with various European nations. These treaties marked a turning-point in the modern history of Siam.

In the century and a half which followed Louis XIV's mission to Ayuthia in 1689 Siam had little or no contact with the West. In the mid-eighteenth century her main preoccupation was the constant war with the Burmese who finally sacked their ancient and splendid capital in 1767. By the time the new house of Chakri had established the capital at Bangkok in 1782 the British East India Company had consolidated its dominion over India. The tea trade with China was growing rapidly and ports of call on the eastern run were obvious advantages. Francis Light obtained Penang island for the Company from the Sultan of Kedah in 1786 for the annual payment of \$6,000 and the vague understanding of British protection. Kedah was an acknowledged feudatory of Siam, but at that time King Rama I was far too busy with the building of Bangkok to concern himself with the incident and the British were not then interested in Siam. Raffles had

lost Java and gained Singapore for a reluctant Company, and Malacca followed. Siam was eventually drawn into the picture not for her trade or her position on the way to China — a little off the route — but, in fact, because of Kedah and the other northern Malay States.

By 1818 the Chakri dynasty had gained sufficient strength to instigate her vassal Kedah to attack the neighbouring Malay State of Perak. The Siamese army then entered Kedah itself and the Sultan fled to Penang. British merchants there were indignant and called on the Company to intervene, but the Supreme Council in Calcutta considered that “a war with Siam would be an evil of very serious magnitude”. Their policy was one of conciliation. “All extension of our territorial possessions and political relations on the side of the Indo-Chinese nations” the Company declared, “...is earnestly to be deprecated and declined as far as the course of events and the force of circumstances permit”.

As well as the Malay States there was the Burma question. The restive Burmese had extended their power to Arakan, thus making them neighbours of the British in India. By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Britain became involved in war with Burma in the southern part of the country. With the extension of the East India Company's interests to Siam's western and southern borders it became desirable that relations between the Company and Bangkok should be regulated on a peaceful basis. At the same time trading relations should be improved. The bad conditions of trade were described by Raffles as “slavish and humiliating” for English merchants. He gave this account of the trade:

“On arrival in port the most valuable part of the cargo is immediately presented to the King who takes as much as he pleases; the remaining part is chiefly consumed in presents to the courtiers and other great men, while the refuse of the cargo is then permitted to be exposed to sale. The part which is consumed in presents to the great men is entire loss; for that which the King receives he generally returns a present which is seldom adequate to the value of the goods which he has received; but by dint of begging and repeated solicitation this is sometimes increased a little.”

To remedy the situation John Crawford was sent to Bangkok by the Governor General of India in 1822.

Crawfurd obtained neither better relations nor easier trading conditions. What is more he was received by King Rama II's officials in a most ungenerous manner. Dr. George Finlayson, the Scots medical officer and naturalist on board their ship the *John Adam* records this impression of the dwelling given to the mission by the Siamese: "A habitation was provided for the British envoy, a miserable place, an out-house with four small, ill-ventilated rooms, approached through a trap-door from below. . ." An official of low rank was sent to them. All he wanted was presents for the King. Finlayson goes on: "In the urgency to obtain and the frequency of the demands of the Court for the gifts there was a degree of meanness and avidity at once disgusting and disgraceful". The King seems to have been petty as well as rude. On one occasion the Foreign Minister called on Crawfurd to help retrieve two pairs of "ordinary glass lamps" on which the King had set his heart. The lamps had been promised, said the Foreign Minister, to His Majesty and sold by a member of the *John Adam's* crew to somebody else!

Fortunately the Crawfurd mission was not treated in such a mean manner throughout all its four months' stay at Bangkok. Dignity was restored by a Royal audience and there was much friendly talk. But he got no improvement in either trade or diplomacy. Crawfurd also tried to get the Siamese to accept a Consul and to obtain exemption for British merchants and crews from the harsh justice of Siam's law, but in these matters he had no success. He comments in his account of the Mission: "If the subjects of a free and civilised Government resort to a barbarous and despotic country, there is no remedy but submission to its laws, however absurd or arbitrary".

Four years later, in 1826, the East India Company sent another mission to Bangkok. By this time the first campaign against the Burmese had been fought and won and there was a new king on the throne of Siam, Mongkut's half brother, Rama III. The mission was led by Captain Henry Burney, a nephew of Fanny Burney and military secretary to the Governor of Penang. He was much more successful than Crawfurd and came away with a treaty which somewhat improved matters. The Burney Treaty did not, however, go very far. It obtained a certain amount of goodwill regarding the frontier and the Malay States but Kedah was still accepted as Siam's vassal. Trade was to be free and

monopolies abolished whilst levies on imports were to be limited, and vessels were to pay a tax on their size. But Burney failed to get permission for a British Consul to reside at Bangkok. Nor was he able to free British nationals from Siamese law.

Next came the Americans. A merchant, Mr. Edmund Roberts, was commissioned by the President to secure a treaty at least as good as the British one. This was seven years later, in 1833. Although a President seemed to the Siamese a much less august personage than a King and America was both remote and less important, Roberts secured his treaty. It was almost exactly the same as the Burney agreement.

In the next two decades, especially in the 'forties, trade became more difficult. In fact the treaties with the British and the Americans gradually eroded away, and the old monopolies were taken back by the Court. Imports and exports were farmed to Chinese merchants by the King. Duties were arbitrary and heavy and trade dwindled. Everywhere else the British had greatly expanded their commerce by mid-century. Singapore was growing rapidly, the China trade had increased still further after the Opium War, the northern coast of Borneo was open to British commerce. It seemed only natural and civilised to the bold merchant princes and sea captains of Victorian England that Siam should, willy-nilly, share in the new prosperity, especially now that the first steamships had reached the Gulf of Siam.

Sir James Brooke, the White Rajah of Sarawak, was the next British envoy to sail up the Menam to Bangkok. He came in August 1850 on board H.M.S. *Sphinx* accompanied by a merchant vessel of the Company, the *Nemesis*, both steamers. Lord Palmerston, the Foreign Secretary, cautioned Sir James to be careful in his quest for better trade.

"In conducting these negotiations", he directed, "you must be very careful not to get involved in any disputes or hostile proceedings which would render our position in Siam worse than it now is or which might compel Her Majesty's Government to have recourse to forcible measures in order to obtain redress. It is very important that if your efforts should not succeed they should at least leave things as they are and should not expose us to the alternative of submitting to fresh affront or of undertaking expensive operations to punish insult".¹

Pursuing this conciliatory line Brooke came to Bangkok determined to win the confidence of the Siamese and to allay their fears. He wrote to a friend:

"I shall not seek to make a treaty in a hurry. I shall try to remove apprehensions and obstacles and pave the way for the future. The King is old and a usurper; he has two legitimate brothers, clever and enlightened, who ought to be raised to the throne.... A treaty extorted by force would be but a wasted bit of parchment..... The Prince Chow-fa Mongkut is an educated man, reads and writes English and knows something of our literature and science".²

With such admirable sentiments Rajah Brooke arrived at the mouth of the Menam. Everything went wrong. The *Sphinx* ran aground attempting to cross the bar at Paknam. When he met the Praklang (the Foreign Minister), every point he raised was opposed. Was there any need for a treaty? What was wrong with the Burney treaty of 1826? When Brooke asked for more freedom of trade the Praklang replied that trade was already free. As for the British having a Consul at Bangkok and being exempt from Siamese law, both proposals were unnecessary and improper. Later talks with the Siamese Ministers made no more progress. They asked Brooke to put his points in writing but letters between the two sides made no more progress than conversations. It was clear that the Siamese did not want a treaty or any improvement in trade or diplomacy with Britain.

The Brooke mission was obviously failing. And as frustration grew Sir James's conciliatory attitude changed. Finally he advised force. In a dispatch to the Foreign Minister he wrote:

"Should these just demands firmly urged be refused, a force should be present immediately to enforce them by a rapid destruction of the defences of the river which would place us in possession of the capital and by restoring us to our proper position of command, retrieve the past and ensure peace for the future, with all its advantages of a growing and most important commerce."³

Brooke alleged, with some justice, that the Burney Treaty had been broken by the Siamese. Monopolies had been restored, trade was no longer free and taxes on British vessels had increased. In

any case, he argued, trade had dwindled and it was in the interests of the Siamese to accept a new treaty which would expand trade.

The White Rajah never met the King. He sailed away with nothing but indignation. He had not openly threatened the Siamese with force but had hinted as much. The old King and his Ministers were not impressed but they must have harboured fears of reprisals — there were so many precedents. In October that year Brooke, addressing himself to Lord Palmerston, evoked high principles in the fine Victorian manner in support of his call for force:

“Justice — compassion — interest — dignity — and a consistent course of policy appear to me to call for decisive measures to be taken without delay.”

And in a letter to friend:

“The Siamese must be taught a lesson . . . our policy should be commanding and our power exerted when necessary. My policy in Sarawak has been high-handed against evil-doers and there, and in England and in Siam, there are bad to be punished as well as good to be cared for . . .”

Mercifully for Siam, Brooke's gun-boat policy was not accepted in London but he did perceive the solution in spite of his call for force. The old King, Rama III, must soon die and there was good prospect that his half brother Prince Mongkut would succeed him. In that event, Brooke said, the prospect of a new relation with Britain was bright.

The *Sphinx* and the *Nemesis* had scarcely left the Menam in September, 1850 when an American mission arrived. It was led by a certain Joseph Ballestier, a not very successful American merchant of Singapore who came with a letter from his President. If the Brooke mission was a failure, Ballestier's was even worse. Bowring comments:

“Mr. Ballestier had not been fortunate in his commercial operations as a merchant at Singapore and it may be doubted whether the nomination of a commercial gentleman whose history was well known to the King and nobles at Bangkok was judicious; it was certainly not deemed complimentary to the proud Siamese authorities.”⁴

Ballestier did not meet the King and so never presented the President's letter. He was treated with little respect and left Bangkok in less than a month without a treaty or hope of one. Ballestier reported angrily to Washington that the only way to improve trade with Siam was by the threat or use of force. After he left fear spread through the city that force might be used. Some teachers who had been instructing American missionaries in the Thai language thought it judicious to leave their employment but all fear was soon to be removed. The old King died in 1851 and Prince Mongkut ascended the throne.

It was the beginning of a new era. From a long period of isolation, from suspicion and fear of Western merchants and sailors, Siam, in the fourth reign of the Chakri dynasty, turned to co-operation, free trade and acceptance of the new civilisation. The change came quickly, almost as soon as the cremation ceremonies of Rama III were completed a year after his death. Emerging from a Buddhist monastery at the age of forty-seven His Majesty Somdet Pra Paramenda Maha Mongkut, King Rama IV, proceeded to reform his kingdom and open new relations with the West.

In 1824 when he was twenty Prince Mongkut had entered the order of monkhood. It was a custom, still sustained today, for all young men to enter the order for three or four months. That might have been the length of Mongkut's service as a monk, but just then, within two weeks of his entering the monastery, his father King Rama II died and his half brother was chosen for the throne. Mongkut decided to remain a Buddhist monk indefinitely. Out of disappointment? This may have been so for his claim to the crown was stronger than that of his half brother, Pra Nangklao. Mongkut was the eldest son of the King by a royal mother and his half brother, though seventeen years his senior, was the son of a lesser wife. However, in Siam the succession is not necessarily according to strict rules of primogeniture and in this instance the choice by the Council of Nobles of Pra Nangklao seemed a wise one. He had had many years experience in matters of state, often assuming duties for his father who was more interested in poetry than politics. But if Mongkut was disappointed, monastic life suited him and he remained a monk for the next twenty-seven years.

Like Sakya-muni who became Gotama Buddha he left the rich life of the Palace for the austerity of monkhood. His head and eyebrows were shaven, his dress was the yellow robe, his dwelling a cell in a city monastery. He shared the simple life of the most humble. Each morning he went into the streets to receive in a metal alms bowl gifts of food from the people. Each day the monks chanted the Pali sutras, studied, or practised meditation. It was a life of abstinence. No worldly wealth is allowed in the Order. It is absolutely forbidden to tell lies, to take any form of life, to gossip, to steal, to have any contact with women, to handle money or to eat after mid-day. A monk's demeanour is important — how to stand, sit, walk, how to address people and how to maintain that composure which is revealed in the face of Buddha's image in every Wat in Thailand.

The discipline was not irksome to Mongkut and it became him as easily as the luxury of the Palace. He immersed himself in Buddhist studies and acquired a good knowledge of Pali, the language of the scriptures. He found in his research that there were serious gaps in the collections of texts and commentaries in Siam. At the young age of thirty-three — he had been in the Order three years — Mongkut became the Abbot of Wat Bowaniwate. He ordered many Pali books from Ceylon to repair the omissions in the Buddhist writings. But the most important part of his work as a monk was the reform and revitalising of the Order of monkhood itself.

Prince Mongkut, the Abbot, found the observance of the code of conduct too slack. Some monks in Wat Po, the Temple of the Reclining Buddha, were even gambling and handling money. He set a new standard of discipline in his own Wat and then established a new sect within the Order. This was the Dharmayuta, the Followers of the Law, which survives today. The rules prescribed for this school of monks are far stricter than for the majority group, the Mahanikai, the Great Sect. Mongkut preached to the monks in his Wat and to the people, bringing a fresh interpretation of the Dharma, the Law, in place of what had become atrophied ritual. In creating a new sect among the monks Mongkut did not bring about a "Reformation"; he left no cleavage among the followers of Buddhism. He re-inspired belief and disciplined practice. That this was done by a Priest, half brother to the King and his likely successor, was doubly significant in a country where

the Throne and Buddhism are, today as much as in the nineteenth century, the foundation of society.

In the West we might think that life in a Buddhist monastery was poor training for kingship. Not so in Siam. Prince Mongkut came to know his people as no Palace-dwelling King could ever do. His colleagues in the monastery were peasants, artisans, sons of nobles and merchants. He walked the streets of Bangkok with his begging bowl and saw the homes of his people. Like other monks he travelled across the country from one Wat to another. His father, Rama II, only left the Palace once a year for the ceremonial presentation of robes to monks at the end of each rainy season and his brother maintained the same semi-divine remoteness.

Mongkut's interests were not limited to Buddhism whilst he was in the Order. His intelligence was singular. He had that rare quality in oriental princes — intellectual curiosity, an eagerness to inquire into things. Not far from Wat Bowaniwate there lived a Roman Catholic priest, no less than the able Frenchman, Bishop Pallegoix, from whom we learn a good deal about the Prince. The Bishop and the Abbot became friends and Mongkut invited Pallegoix to preach Christian sermons to his brother monks in the Wat. The sermons and discussions were impressive. Mongkut admired the Christian morals and achievements which the Bishop explained to his yellow-robed congregation, but the Abbot could make nothing of Christian doctrine. With immodest presumption he commented: "What you teach people to do is admirable but what you teach them to believe is foolish."

Bishop Pallegoix learned Pali and a great deal about Buddhism from the royal Abbot and, in exchange, he taught Mongkut some Latin and French. This was the Prince's introduction to the thought of the Western world. He learned about Christianity and the customs of Europeans. He became interested in mathematics and science. Other Christians of a different sort had recently come to Bangkok. These were the American Presbyterian missionaries who brought with them the first printing press, a new kind of Christianity which, to Mongkut's astonishment, included married priests, for they brought their wives and, most precious of all, the English language. Their leader, the Rev. Dr. Beach Bradley, became Mongkut's English tutor. He found in the Abbot a most apt and diligent student who quite quickly acquired a good

knowledge of the language. English for Mongkut was the key to the new knowledge. What he had started with the French bishop he now continued more avidly with the American missionaries. Geography, mathematics and especially astronomy fascinated him and he found no inconsistency between Buddhism and science. He placed no obstacles in the way of the American Presbyterians who, like the Catholic Bishop, were invited to discuss religion and to preach their doctrine.

Here then was an unusual Abbot of a Buddhist monastery in nineteenth century Siam; not that Buddhists are ever inimical to other faiths but Mongkut excelled in liberalism. As a devout and learned monk he had brought fresh inspiration and discipline to his religion. As a monk he had come to know his people and his country better than any of his royal predecessors. And because of his intellectual stamina he had acquired a greater knowledge of Western civilisation than any of his contemporaries.

When Mongkut became King Rama IV in 1851 he had been a monk for twenty-seven years. The kingdom which he inherited was a feudal corner of Asia, an absolute monarchy in which the people were forbidden to look upon the face of the King. Slavery was common, polygamy normal. The economy was primitive, the population small, there were no roads and no schools. Except for a few missionaries and merchants there was practically no contact with the Western world. King Mongkut determined to change all this. Nobody urged him, there was no popular discontent, no demand for reform. He was his own most radical liberal.

Within a year of his accession decrees came from the Palace "by Royal Command, reverberating like the roar of a lion" which began the slow process of change. The people were invited to look at the King when he moved among them, not to shut their windows and run away. Citizens could send him petitions on any matter and he would investigate each complaint. He did not abolish slavery but he insisted on good treatment for slaves. Nothing was too detailed for him: he issued edicts on the safe construction of fire-places and ovens and the improvement of window fittings. To prevent disease he ordered that dead animals should not be thrown in the canals. He reformed the currency, replacing lumps of gold and silver with flat coins.

The new King imported printing presses, mainly for the publication of Buddhist writings. He encouraged monks to teach in the monasteries. He continued his own studies, particularly of astronomy and acquired telescopes and other scientific equipment. Some ten years after he became King he took the unprecedented step of employing a foreign woman, the celebrated Anna Leonovens, to act as governess and tutor to his numerous children.

King Mongkut built roads, canals and bridges. New Wats and new palaces were constructed at his command. He encouraged ship-building and personally supervised the building of the first steam-boat on the Menam, importing an engine from England. He abolished the *corvée* — forced labour required for land or other privileges — and replaced it by taxation. There was no limit to his energy or his delight in innovation, but in one respect King Mongkut saw no need for change.

He kept an enormous harem in his Palace. Having been celibate for twenty-seven years he now set about building the biggest Royal Family of the Chakri Dynasty. In the "Inside" of the Palace there was a veritable city of women — reports say three thousand or more. They were mostly servants, 'Amazons' for guards, officials, maids and so on, but Mongkut acquired thirty-two wives and by the time he died, aged sixty-four, he had eighty-two children. Some accounts put the number of wives and concubines much higher. Townshend Harris, the American envoy who concluded a treaty with Siam in 1856 — following the British success in 1855 — commented in his dispatches to Washington: "After some twenty years spent in the rigid celibacy of the priesthood the King gives up a large portion of his time to voluptuous pleasures . . . he is indulging himself in a manner equally repugnant to decency and the laws of his religion of which he was a stern supporter while in the priesthood."⁵ It was, of course, a custom and one required especially of the monarch, but it is a little surprising that the reforming zeal of the King did not extend to his prodigious practice of polygamy.

Of all his reforms the most significant was in his relations with the West. As soon as he became King a new attitude was revealed. He indicated willingness to have a return visit from the disappointed Brooke of Sarawak. Could Sir James come, he said, a little later to allow for the prolonged cremation ceremonies

necessary for the late King? He would be welcome then, that is in 1852. At the same time he took the initiative in improving trading conditions. Monopolies were partly removed and duties on imports and exports reduced. For a moment it seemed that Siam's foreign relations could be improved without formal treaty and the British Government did not press the matter. But in fact there was much to be done, and with a new British Plenipotentiary at Hong Kong it was opportune to resume discussions.

Sir John Bowring was a very different diplomat from his three British predecessors, Crawford, Burney and Brooke or the American envoys Roberts and Ballestier. He was an intellectual, a radical reformer, a disciple and editor of Jeremy Bentham, a linguist who could prattle in a dozen languages, an ex-Member of Parliament and a writer of hymns, an inveterate talker, a man with limitless energy and a Victorian capacity for pomposity and self-glory. After a career of business, politics, writing and self-appointed diplomacy in the courts of Europe, Bowring, being short of money, accepted public office as Consul at Canton. That was in 1849 when he was fifty-seven. Some five years later he became Governor of Hong Kong, Superintendent of Trade and, most glorious of all, Her Majesty's Plenipotentiary responsible for relations with China, Japan, Siam and all countries in the Far East.

Bowring's five years Governorship of the island colony on the coast of China was anything but successful. Some of his senior officials were incompetent and even corrupt, and he was unpopular among the British merchants. Worst of all he precipitated the second Anglo-Chinese war by sending warships to bombard Canton over a quite unworthy incident. But he was completely successful when he sailed to Bangkok in March, 1855, to negotiate a treaty with the Siamese.

Most of the detailed business of the negotiations was done by Bowring's young assistants, his son John C. Bowring, an employee of Jardine, Matheson and Co. in Hong Kong, and Harry Parkes, his secretary, who was later to have a distinguished career as Consul at several ports on the China coast. (Mongkut referred to the young men as "Mr. Parkes and Your Excellency's up-spring".) But it was Bowring and King Mongkut who created the favourable atmosphere which allowed progress to be rapid and the discussions congenial. It was clear from the start that the

Siamese were willing to have a treaty which would open up trade and increase Western influence. They had some anxiety, however, about what the Cochin-Chinese — the Vietnamese — would think about the treaty. Would they conclude that the Siamese had surrendered to the British? King Mongkut asked Bowring time and again to go to Cochin-China to make a similar treaty. The King was also anxious about the kind of man who would be chosen as British Consul, if this article of the treaty were accepted. Would he be as much a gentleman as Sir John? Bowring assured him that only the best man would be appointed and that he hoped to go to Cochin-China.

The whole business for this momentous treaty was transacted in the most felicitous manner. King Mongkut and his equally intelligent Prime Minister, Praya Suriwongse, understood the issues at stake; these were not merely the details of imports and exports, the appointment of Consuls and the rights of foreigners, they were no less than the independence of Siam and the beginning of her modernization. It was much to Bowring's credit (and to Harry Parkes and young Bowring) that he was able to gain the confidence of the King, to allay his fears, and to assure the Siamese that the new policy that the treaty was launching was greatly to their own as well as to the British advantage.

The Treaty of Friendship and Commerce was signed on 18th April, 1855, less than a month after the arrival of the mission. Its first article pledged perpetual peace and friendship and the protection of the two nations' subjects in each other's countries. Article 2 provided for the appointment of a British Consul at Bangkok who would have jurisdiction over British subjects in Siam. The third article was an extension of the second, requiring that Siamese offenders should be given up to Siamese justice and British offenders to British justice, that is, the Consul. This was the system of extra-territorial rights which had recently been obtained from the Chinese after the Opium War. It was an infringement of Siam's sovereignty but it gave assurance to British subjects that they would not be exposed to the severity of Siamese justice and encouraged the setting up of business houses. This right was given up in 1909, long before its withdrawal in China, in return for the independence of Kedah and the other northern Malay States from Siam. The next three articles of the treaty were all concerned with the rights of British subjects. They could

live in Bangkok and buy or rent property there, and within a distance from the capital measured by how far a local boat could travel within twenty-four hours. Beyond that the Siamese could not undertake to ensure their safe protection. British subjects, who must register with their Consul and carry identity documents, could observe their own religion and build churches. This provision was scarcely necessary when we recall Mongkut's welcome to the missionaries. The treaty also specified that British subjects could employ Siamese servants.

British ships-of-war were allowed to sail up the Menam as far as Paknam—about twenty miles from Bangkok—but no further without special permission. If an ambassador were to arrive he could sail all the way to the capital in his warship.

Then followed the commercial articles. The monopolies of the King and his nobles were abolished and trade was made free. British merchants might buy from the producer direct and sell their imports to anyone without interference. The duties levied on ships according to their size were abolished, and all imports were to be subject to a tax of three per cent. Exports were to be taxed once only; the amount of the duty being specified in a schedule attached to the treaty. Opium was to be admitted without duty and sold to a single merchant. The export of rice was now permitted for the first time, but the treaty provided for a ban on its export—and on the export of salt and fish—in times of scarcity. Permission was given to British companies to build ships in Siam. Article 10 was a "most favoured nation" clause: Bowring had the foresight to expect that other countries would follow the British example and he insisted that the terms they obtained would never be better than those he had just secured. Lastly, there was provision for the revision of the treaty in ten years.

Everyone was happy and especially King Mongkut. Bowring was received in Royal audience formally and for several hours in private. He visited the Second King, Mongkut's equally gifted younger brother, who held this peculiarly Siamese post of deputy monarch. Mongkut wrote a personal letter to Queen Victoria and entrusted it to Parkes who was to take back the text of the treaty to London for ratification. Elaborate gifts were collected for the Queen. The King was in excellent spirits, delighting in

ceremonies, audiences and banquets. A white elephant had been captured the previous year, the most auspicious of auguries for the new reign and now its presence seemed to be bringing the expected good fortune. Mongkut seemed to enjoy the company of the Englishmen, particularly Bowring whom he called "my friend". As a parting gift he offered Sir John two elephants, but they were gracefully declined owing to transport difficulties. But Bowring did accept two tufts of hair from the white elephant's tail, which he later presented to Queen Victoria.

The gates were open. Within a year the Americans and the French had signed their own versions of the treaty with King Mongkut. In the next three years half a dozen European nations had similar agreements with the Siamese. By April, 1856, Harry Parkes returned with the Queen's instrument of ratification and a personal letter from Her Majesty. King Mongkut was delighted with this royal favour from mighty Britain and ordered a procession for formal delivery of the letter. In fact these ceremonies infuriated Townshend Harris, the newly-arrived American envoy, as he had to wait many days before he could begin discussions on his own treaty.

The effect of Mongkut's treaties with the West were far-reaching. Trade increased rapidly and had more than doubled by the time of the King's death in 1868. The character of the trade changed. There was virtually no export of rice before 1855, and by the end of the century rice accounted for nearly seventy per cent of Siam's exports. Bangkok grew rapidly, foreign merchants set up offices in the capital and there was an increase in the number of Chinese entering the country. The King's fiscal system had to change. Instead of royal monopolies of imports, taxes were charged at an agreed level.

The political effects were even more important. Foreign consuls lived in the capital and Siam sent embassies to Europe for the first time. The King took the initiative in employing foreign experts in his civil service. This practice was greatly extended in the next reign, that of his son, King Chulalongkorn. British officers were employed in the police force. A Belgian advised on legal reform. Germans were invited to plan the building of railways. Americans and Danes were appointed to civil and military duties. Most notorious of these appointments was that of Anna

was delighted. But it was then, enjoying his astronomy, showing off his English, and gratifying his vanity in front of foreign dignitaries, that he contracted a fever from which he never recovered. He returned to Bangkok and was dead within a few weeks. The work which he had started was carried on by his Prime Minister, Praya Suriwongse, who acted as Regent of the country until the Crown Prince Chulalongkorn came of age. His reign was successful but the way had been opened by his father, King Mongkut.

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1. } From 'Siam and Sir James Brooke' by Nicholas Tarling in the
2. } *Journal of the Siam Society*, vol. XLVII Part 2, November 1960.
3. }
4. From *The Kingdom and People of Siam* by Sir John Bowring, London, 1857.
5. From *Mongkut, the King of Siam* by Abbot Law Moffat, Cornell University Press, 1961.
6. From 'English Correspondence of King Mongkut' in the *Journal of the Siam Society*, vol. XXII, July 1928.

sources the bestness and most curiosity of the new breach-loading cannon invented by Sir William Armstrong I was eagerly desirous of obtaining one small gun for my own enjoyment or play to see the power and curiosity and usefulness etc. thereof”⁶

He was too fond of women but he is said to have treated his wives well and to have loved all his enormous nursery of children. If his harem may be regarded as a mark of eastern backwardness in a changing world his social and economic reforms vastly outweighed this defect. Mongkut was the pioneer in the modernisation of Siam. He had vision for the future of his country. Harry Parkes writing on the negotiations records this impression of the man :

“I was fortunate in securing and maintaining the friendship of the First King who listened to several of my propositions even against the will of his Ministers. He is really an enlightened man It is scarcely a matter of surprise that he should be capricious and at times not easily guided but he entered into the treaty well aware of its force and meaning and is determined, I believe, as far as in him lies, to execute faithfully all his engagements which are certainly of the most liberal nature.”

The “force and meaning” of the Treaty was the opening of Siam to western commerce and ideas, social and economic reform and her continued independence. Balanced between competing empires, Siam accepted reform and western influence and by yielding, averted domination.

The circumstances of Mongkut’s death were typical of the King. He predicted an eclipse of the sun in 1868 and made elaborate arrangements to observe the event. He chose a place far to the south, near the Malay States, and invited Sir Harry Ord, Governor of the Straits Settlements, his officials and their ladies to attend. Invitations had gone to Paris to send French scientists. A palace and residences for the distinguished visitors were built, and quantities of European food and wine were brought to this remote spot. The King with his suite of nobles and their wives sailed south for the occasion. Mongkut’s prediction was right, and at the last moment the clouds cleared to reveal the eclipse. The foreign visitors were much impressed and Mongkut

was delighted. But it was then, enjoying his astronomy, showing off his English, and gratifying his vanity in front of foreign dignitaries, that he contracted a fever from which he never recovered. He returned to Bangkok and was dead within a few weeks. The work which he had started was carried on by his Prime Minister, Praya Suriwongse, who acted as Regent of the country until the Crown Prince Chulalongkorn came of age. His reign was successful but the way had been opened by his father, King Mongkut.

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