

THE LABOR FORCE IN THAI SOCIAL HISTORY

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In this paper, the Thai social history from the 14th century to 1932 the year of democratic constitutional change will be reviewed. Special attention will be focused on the manipulation of labor force or manpower and the change of social class structure during Ayuthaya, Thonburi, Early and Late Bangkok periods.

The study of Thai political history can be divided into four periods as the following.

1. Sukhothai Period (1238-1349)
2. Ayuthaya Period (1350-1767)
3. Early Bangkok Period (1767-1868)
4. Late Bangkok Period (1868-1932).

1. Sukhothai Period (1238-1349)

The first viable kingdom of the Thais was established around 1238 at Sukhothai in the Northern part of Thailand. It is known as the period of paternalistic governing system. The king was like a father to his people, being both their leader in war and chief judge. All citizens were free men, had no obligation to repay to the governor. In the stone inscription dated 1292, it was engraved that,

"Sukhothai is the good country. In the water there is fish, in the field there is rice. The king does not levy a rate on his people Whoever wants to trade in elephants, trades. Whoever wants to trade in horses, trades. Whoever wants to trade in silver and gold, trades. The faces of people shine bright." (Sayamananda 1973:20)

From this inscription, it is clearly understood that Sukhothai was an agricultural community, located on the side of the Yom River. All villagers in Sukhothai were ruled by a chief who was appointed as '*Phokhun*' which means Father.

The principle ideology of this peaceful society was Buddhism. Originally, animism was the main belief system of the people in this area. Sukhothai Buddhism was introduced in the reign of King Ramkamhaeng (1279-1300) from Sri Lanka through Nakorn-Srithamarat in southern Thailand. The monk delegations from Nakorn-Srithamarat went to Sri Lanka to study the newly revised Buddhist scriptures and brought back Lanka Buddhism. However, after King Ramkamhaeng's reign was over, Sukhothai began to decline progressively during the reign of the following six kings. Meanwhile another Thai kingdom of Ayuthaya had risen in the southern flooded basin of the Chao Phraya River.

2. Ayuthaya Period (1350-1767)

There is no authentic evidence of the birth of Ayuthaya. In 1350, it was found that Ayuthaya was stably established as a large kingdom on the lower part of Chao Phraya river plain. When the power of Sukhothai in the north and the power of Khmer in the east declined, Ayuthaya became the most powerful kingdom in the peninsular.

Compared to Sukhothai, Ayuthaya was in the more advanced mode of economic development and better organized in administrative systems. The success of Ayuthaya was based on the fertility of the soil of the great basin of Chao Phraya River. The basin could produce not only sufficient harvest to support the people of its kingdom but also much surplus for export. This kingdom was located at the strategic point combining the hinterland with maritime regions on the Gulf of Siam, which then began to increase its importance in international trade. By controlling the hinterland regions, it was made possible to command a fair amount of land for rice cultivation and for heavy population attached to this land. The domination over the maritime region enabled Ayuthaya to pursue advantages trade and contacts with the outside world. (Kasetsiri 1976:18-19) Based on these factors, Ayuthaya was distinctive from Sukhothai in four major characteristics: kingship, administrative system, social classes and manpower controlling system.

Kingship

Having contacted with the highly sophisticated Khmer kingdom and influenced by Brahmanism, which was spreading widely in Southeast Asia during that period, Ayuthaya accepted the concept of divine kingship. The king was regarded as the reincarnation of the celestial god. The Brahmins in court surrounding the king performed Hindu-styled rituals. On the king's coronation, the chief deities particularly the God Shiva were invited down to the earth to merge into the person of the crowned king. (Wales 1965: 56)

However, the population were mostly Buddhists. The king accepted Buddhism as the national state religion in order to enable him to control the people through their cosmology. The common people and the Buddhist monks generally regarded the king as a Bodhisattva or the pre-Buddha. Both Brahmanism and Buddhism operated synergistic functions. According to Kasetsiri, Brahmanistic elements provided the kingship with the majestic aura of mystery and the cosmic order which supported the authority to rule over the various and widely scattered population. (Kasetsiri 1976:109) Buddhism was used for the purpose of national unity.

One of the major tasks, which Ayuthaya kings undertook, was the construction of Buddhist temples. It was explained by Kasetsiri that when the temple was erected, some monks were to be assigned there. Along with them a group of people known as *kha-phra* or temple slaves were moved in to reside nearby, with an area of land for cultivation donated by the court. It should be noted that not only the temple slaves but also other population groups were encouraged to reside in the vicinity of the temple, making the area around it a community. The early kings of Ayuthaya built many temples especially in the area of Ayuthaya itself. This gave a guarantee that the center of the kingdom was surrounded by manpower which the court could make use of as the

permanent basis (Rabibhadana 1969:41).

While the king was accepted as Bodhisattva or Hindu god, he was expected to play some roles considered as the proper virtues of the king; it was called “*Thosaphit Rajatham*”. These principles were derived from the *Thammasat* or the *Pali Thammasat* the concept obtained directly from the Mon. The ideal monarch was described as a King of Righteousness, elected by the people and abiding steadfast in the ten kingly virtues. They were alms giving, morality, liberality, rectitude, gentleness, self-restriction, non-anger, non-violence, forbearance and non-obstruction. (Rabibhadana 1969:44)

Also, the absolute power of the king was shown in the royal decree of A.D. 1740 that, “*Only the king is highest in the land because he is godlike. He can make a superior person become a subordinate person, and vice versa. When the king gives an order, it is like the axe of heaven. If it strikes trees and mountains, the latter cannot withstand it, and will be destroyed.*” (Rabibhadana 1969:25)

The king was the only person in the kingdom who possessed such an absolute power. It also meant that everybody became the king’s subject. With this concept, Ayuthaya people were controlled and arranged completely different from Sukhothai’s people.

Administrative System

During the 417 years of Ayuthaya period, the administrative system was frequently changed due to political conflict. Violent struggles for the throne were normal phenomenon inside the Ayuthaya court. This brought the administration of Ayuthaya under the principle of divided and rule. Military and civil section with their own chief ministers were completely separated in order to make balance of power and prevent the high ranking officials from having private contact with each other (Rabibhadana 1969:19). It could be said that the lack of unity in ministration was one reason that led Ayuthaya’s to serious defeat to the Burmese army in 1569 and 1767.

Social Classes

Generally speaking, the Ayuthaya period was an almost continuous war, both to protect its own kingdom and to retain its subordinate countries and cities. The Ayuthaya kingdom struggled with various enemies, among them Burma was the predominant enemy. Because of the warfare, maintenance of manpower and labor force was extremely significant, nevertheless the lacking of manpower had been the most serious problem of Ayuthaya at all times. In this region of Asian continent, one kingdom would attack and invade the others in order to take away a number of people to its own territory. According to this ‘attack and take’ incidents, the population’s movement was difficult to control. In any small or serious warfare, besides the casualty, the survivors ran away into the forest, became out of control. Moreover, normal practice was in each war the victor always carried off a large numbers of people from the conquered territory back to its own land. These factors provided a situation for the growth of a strong monarchical power, and a strict organization which was tailored for rapid mobilization of manpower. (Rabibhadana 1969:17)

There is no reliable data on the total number of population of Ayuthaya, but there was an estimation by a French. La Lourbere stated that the population on governmental rolls numbered only 1,900,000 persons in 1688. (Ingram 1971:14) Regarding the social class, people of Ayuthaya were divided into four main categories.

Royal families (*Chao*)

This category consisted of the king's family and their descendants. The descendants of the king would become commoners after the fifth generation, because the title dropped one rank with each succeeding generation and there were only five major ranks. (Ingram 1971:14) But usually the member of the royal family would be given a title or married to the person of royal or noble class.

Nobles and high officials (*Khunnang*)

In-between the king and the mass of people were the nobles and high ranked officials who administered the country. Their titles were neither permanent nor transferable to their descendants. Frequently, the nobles made relationship with the king by sending their daughters to be wives of the king. These wives became both agents of their families and hostages ensuring their loyalty and obedience. (Rabibhadana 1969:20)

Commoners (*Phrai*)

The *phrai*, or the so-called "free-man" were major workforce who were under obligation to do *corvee* labor for the king. Doing the king's affair was called "*tam ratchakarn*" in Thai. This class of people will be clearly explained later in the manpower controlling system.

Slaves (*Thaat*)

Thaat or the Thai slave is a different concept from that of European and the English word "slave" or "serf" on which I will later elaborate.

Manpower Controlling System (Thai semi-feudalism)

Throughout the periods of Ayuthaya and Early Bangkok from 1356 till 1899, there was a law forcing every commoner aged eighteen to sixty to register as a *phrai* under a supervisor or a master called *nai*. A *phrai* was to do the *corvee* labor for six months a year. (Sookphanich 1975:31) The Royal Decree of 1527 quoted that those who failed to register with a *nai* were to be arrested and punished. (Rabibhadana 1969:30) Obviously, any one refused to register was an independent subject, not eligible to receive the royal protection for their life and property. The three categories of the *phrai* were recently investigated, made cleared and confirmed of its controlling system by the study of Akin Rabibhadana. They were,

1. *Phrai laung*. They belonged to the king and were compelled to do services (the *corvee*) which was called *ratchakarn* (king's affairs) for him, for six months a year. The king arranged them to be under the control of the officers who were nobles. The officers became their *nai*

(superior or master). (Rabibhadana 1969:31) The *nai* had power over them only as long as he held the official position. Once the officers or nobles were retired, they lost control over these type of commoners.

2. *Phrai som*. This type of *phrai* belonged to their *nai* completely. They did not have to do governmental *corvee*. Instead, they served their own *nai*. Princes and nobles could own these *phrai som* but the main possessors of *phrai som* were princes. (Rabibhadana 1969:33) *Phrai som* served their *nai* in all kinds of tasks. They would likely obtain food from the *nai*'s large kitchen. The main part of the duty of *phrai som* was to give "gifts" regularly to their *nai*.

3. *Phrai suay*. They were the *phrai* who lived in an area to produce material of which was in much demand by the government. Tin and gunpowder were prominent along such products. Instead of doing *corvee*, this type of *phrai* was required to supply the government with a definite amount of the products each year. (Rabibhadana 1969:35)

In brief, the *phrai laung* were the king's manpower and the *phrai som* were the manpower of the princes and nobles. At the time when weapons and technology were not much developed, manpower was the only determinant of power. Owing to the fact that the *phrai laung* was the only labor force under the king's control, while the princes held their own *phrai som* and controlled *phrai laung* which attached to their titles on behalf of the king, the king would make every effort to increase and not to lose his *phrai laung*. For instance when a person was arrested for non-registration, he must be registered as *phrai laung*. There was a law against shifting from *phrai laung* to *phrai som* but promoting the shift from *phrai som* to *phrai laung*. After a war or struggle, a lot of *phrai* would lose their master *nai*, in that case they would be undertaken as *phrai laung* even though they were previously *phrai som*.

Phrai laung had the hardest work such as the construction of palaces, temples, digging canals, etc. and had the most difficult living among the three types of *phrai*. They were given neither food nor payment while they were doing the king's affairs. In addition, they were often called upon to work for and served the *nai* just as the *phrai som* did. (Rabibhadana 1969:34) No wonder that no one wished to be *phrai laung*. Many people tried to escape from being *phrai laung*.

There were four possible ways to avoid the *corvee*. First, one could run into the forest. The country was under populated and there was as yet no effective means of identification. Second, the *phrai laung* could bribe his *nai* to help him by substituting another person to do his *corvee* or neglecting to register his children as *phrai laung*. Third, most of the Thai men went into monkhood at a certain time of their lives. While they were monks, they were exempted from *corvee*. For a *phrai laung* who became a monk for a long duration, there was a possibility that he could somehow slip out of the list. Last, the *phrai laung* could get out of his status by becoming a slave. Debt slaves were prevalent. By getting deep into debt, one could become a slave. (Rabibhadana 1969:34-35)

During Ayuthaya period, certainly there was a law enforcing *corvee* labor but the method of control was not as effective as in the later period. After the second fall of Ayuthaya in 1767, King Taksin came to reestablish the new capital on the lower plain of Chao Phraya river on the Bay of Siam. In order to build the new kingdom, it was an urgent need to gather people for use of their

labor. In 1774, King Taksin passed a law ordering every *phrai* to make a tattoo on the wrist naming the city and the *nai* so that nobody could escape from *ratchakarn*, the king's affairs. (Sookphanich 1975:41) The period of *corvee* was still six months a year as the same as during the Ayuthaya period.

Later on in the reign of King Rama I (1782-1809), the Chinese migrants who were encouraged to immigrate into the country during the reign of King Taksin had greatly increased in number. They became a good source of cheap hired labor for the government. Owing to the continuous availability of these immigrant laborers, Rama I allowed the reduction of the *corvee* labor from six months to four months a year. Also those who did not want to do the *corvee* were allowed to pay a *ratchakarn* or service money for 18 baht per year. (Srisootphan 1975:215) In other word, the *ngern ratchakarn* money from a *phrai* was spent in hiring Chinese and other laborers. In the reign of Rama II (1809-1824) there was an increasing use of Chinese hired laborers, to work in many of constructions and cultivations of the king's projects. Rama II reduced the *corvee* period to three months a year in order to give people time to work in their agricultural field to produce the products for export. In the reign of Rama V (1867-1910) the *corvee* labor system had been completely abolished in 1899, as a part of the reformation of the country's administrative structure.

Slaves (*Thaat*)

Besides the commoners, Slaves were another group of population, which had an interesting social status and function in the Thai historical society. Slavery in Thailand is understood to have begun in the late period of Sukhothai. It had been practiced throughout Ayuthaya period and continued into Early Bangkok period. Slavery was abolished in 1874 in the reign of Rama V as well as the *corvee* labor system in 1899.

According to the Law on Slavery, seven kinds of slaves were described. However mainly it can be divided in to two types, the redeemable slaves and the interest bearing slaves. They were both debt or bond slaves. According to the principle upon which the law on slavery operated, a man had an ownership of himself, his wife and his children. Thus he was legally entitled to sell himself, his wife and his children to another person. (Rabibhadana1969:105) In general, Thai law considered a slave as both a legal object and a legal subject. As a legal object, a slave could be sold and his services leased. As a legal subject the slave was allowed to own property, inherit property, enter into contact, and have access to the court of justice. Thus a slave had right to redeem himself. (Rabibhadana 1969:105)

The duty of the slave was to serve his owner. They had to work all kinds of tasks the same as *phrai som* did, but the slaves were not free as *phrai som*. There was no law to determine how many slaves one could own. The nobles and the well-to-do commoners could own as many slaves as they were able to afford. It can be said that the Thai society before the reformation of Rama V, production was mainly based on the work of the classes of commoners and slaves.

Sakdina (power of field)

Another characteristic of Thai society in this period was that the status of people were clearly

determined by the precisely amount of *sakdina* which everybody held. The word *sakdina* literally means power (*sakdi*) of field (*na*). *Phrai* or commoner held *sakdina* of 25 *rai* (1 acre=2.5 *rai*), which legally means that each man was allowed to cultivate the land only as much as he and his family could cultivate, at most 25 *rai*. In return for being allowed to make their living from cultivating the land that they occupied, they were obliged to deliver a portion of their produce to their lord, and some of which he himself was obliged to deliver up to his superior lord or to the prince (*nai*). (Wales1965:45)

The officials held *sakdina* which ranged from 400 to 10,000 *rai*. There appears to have been a strong correlation between the amount of *sakdina* one possessed and the number of people one had beneath his control. H.C. Quaritch Wales states that the *sakdina* enables one to tell the number of *phrai* under the control of *nai*. Since each of *phrai* was granted the *sakdina* of 25 *rai*, thus one *nai* of *sakdina* of 400 *rai* controlled 16 men (*phrai*). (Wales 1965 : 50) It means that the scale of *sakdina* was closely connected with the scale of manpower under the *nai*. But in that period of time, the land was plentiful in Thailand while the manpower was lacking. The *nai* scarcely gained enough manpower to fill their amount of *sakdina*.

By this practice, the Thai semi-feudalism or the control of manpower was the most important factor in social organization in Ayuthaya period. The control of land was the secondary importance which was much different from the European and Japanese feudalism.

3. Early Bangkok Period (1767-1868)

The early Bangkok period will be described in two parts, during the period of King Taksin's reign and during the period of the first four kings of the Chakkri dynasty.

King Taksin (1767-1782)

In the same year of 1767, after the fall of Ayuthaya, Phraya Taksin gathered his men, struck back the Burmese invaders, succeeded in the recapturing capital at Thonburi on the west bank of Chao Phraya river, and proclaimed himself the King of Siam. The super structure of Ayuthaya was destroyed by the Burmese. Soon after the fall of Ayuthaya, six Thai states were independently established and fought to each other. It took King Taksin several fights and many years to unite all of them under the Thonburi government. King Taksin had to urgently strengthen his kingdom in order to be secured from the reattack of the Burmese. These tasks were completed during his reign of fifteen years.

To resurrect the country, repair the system and revive the royal traditions in his court, King Taksin had a hard time seeking the specialists and scholars who survived the great war of Ayuthaya. It might be because King Taksin was a Chinese descendant himself, among the officials some Chinese scholars called *Chin-Laung* (Royal Chinese) were invited to the court. Lacking of capable personnel and craftsmen in the high level, and lacking of labor force for general labor work were main problems. At the meanwhile, in China famine and civil war forced people to move out. Great number of Chinese migrated into several countries in Asia. It was no

doubt that many of them, scholar Chinese, skilled labors, and peasants flowed to Thai kingdom where they were just welcomed. However the manpower controlling system in Thonburi was still the same as that of Ayuthaya.

King Taksin's reign lasted only fifteen years. The throne was seized by one of his fighting colleagues who was then a top ranked official, Chao Phraya Chakkri. King Taksin was executed in 1782, and Chao Phraya Chakkri proclaimed himself King Rama I, the first king of the Chakkri Dynasty.

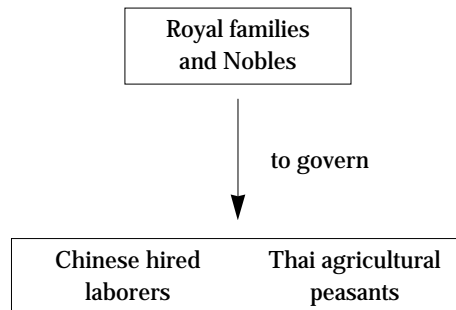
Rama I - Rama IV (1782-1868)

The reign of king Rama I was still in the recovering period from the war. To rebuild Bangkok was not an easy task but Ayuthaya after the defeat was too destructive to repair. Besides, Bangkok had an advantageous location. For economic reason, Bangkok is located at the center of the alluvial plain of Chao Phraya river, the land was abundant even without the modern irrigation technique, contrasting with Sukhothai. As Bangkok faces directly to the Siam Bay, it was more convenient for international trade, contrasting with Ayuthaya. King Rama I continued the previous king's tasks in improving legal system, traditions and cultures. His most important work was to purify Buddhism. After the war the Bhramanistic and animistic beliefs were widely practiced among the people. Rama I cleaned up those beliefs and practices by commanding the destruction all Shiva Linka ¹ located in the temples. At the same time he reorganized the Buddhist hierarchy. The monk's discipline was tighten up in order to maintain a respectable standard of the monk's behavior. The Buddhist scripture was assiduously revised at the royal expenses. (Sayamananda 1973:105) This ideological control much contributed to the integration and stability of the nation.

Social structure of Early Bangkok was still feudalistic as the same as Ayuthaya. Rama I saw the importance of yielding more agricultural products as an item of the international trade. Therefore, he allowed people to do *corvee* labor for four months instead of six months a year as before. Those who did not want to work could substitute his labor by paying money as having mentioned. To gain the labor, Rama I arranged to hire the cheap Chinese labor which was available from the great immigration from China at that time. In fact, the Chinese laborers worked more diligently than the *phrai*'s *corvee*, so that they were preferable. In the reign of Rama II (1809-1824), the big project of digging canals for irrigation and transportation in Bangkok was initiated. All of laborers recruited in this project were Chinese. (Ramagomut 1976:2)

It was correlated that since the Chinese laborers were introduced the *corvee* labor was rapidly declined because of its own inefficiency. The Thai laborers were retreating to the agricultural work. The hired Chinese labor took the place of the *corvee* labor. Besides, the Chinese migrants in general did not have any interest in agriculture. By this complementary roles, the new structure of ethnic division of labor emerged. I assumed the social structure of early Bangkok period was as shown in the figure below,

Chart 1. The Social Structure of Early Bangkok Period



At the beginning of the 19th century, the Thai kings began to engage in extensive international trade and to be increasingly concerned with monetary matters. (Ramagomut 1976:2) Clearly seen in the reign of Rama III (1824-1851), the king expanded international trade and made good money from the local products of which he received and monopolized the right to buy cheaply from his people, at the same time farming taxation was implemented to increase the king's revenue. During the reign of Rama III, tax farming expanded to cover 38 objects of taxation. (Ramagomut 1976:40) A lottery was also established on the farm basis. Taxes were farmed out to Chinese monopolists, the Chinese traders took the function of tax collectors. The collectors were considered equivalent public officials with the *sakdina* of 400 *rai*. With the official ranks, a number of those Chinese collectors naturally regarded as and became Thai citizens where later on they could socially climbed up to higher position; some could be as high as a town governor. (Rabibhadana 1969:135) Under this structure of power, the Chinese became intermediaries to take exploitative portion from people and delivered to the king. Owing to this fact, the structure of domination of the noble and high official class was reorganized in terms of increasing layer in contact with commoners. In other words, the governing classes became a part of the direct exploitation of their own people, leaving economic aspects of the people's life, business and affairs to the Chinese. The Chinese intermediaries who represented the governmental agents gained most advantages from the system, in exploiting ordinary Thai people. In my view, this point is considered the important change of Thai social structure which, shaped up the whole society for many years later.

It is interesting to find that the Chinese immigrants in Thailand different from their counterparts in other southeast Asian countries, had some advantages, which provided them better chance to move up their socioeconomic status. The Chinese immigrants unlike the Mon, Khmer and other immigrants, they were not marked, neither eligible for the *corvee* nor restricted in their movement. Typically, the Chinese began their career as wage laborers and after having accumulated assets, they became traders. Large number of them became successful and wealthy. (Rabibhadana 1969:181) The Chinese traders had created their commercial network among the overseas Chinese, in which later on the native Thai traders were excluded in some certain fields. When capitalization was forming its process and structure, most of the capitalists were Chinese

and Chinese descendants.

In the nineteenth century, colonialism of the Western countries expanded into Asian region. By 1870, the Great Britain had conquered Burma and Malaya in the West and South of Thailand, and France had colonized Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam in the East and West. Thailand was also plentiful of raw materials such as teak, rubber, tin, sugar and rice. Thus Thailand was confronting the problem of how to survive this colonial crisis, to remain independent. Rama IV decided to sign a treaty called Bowring Treaty with Great Britain in 1855. This treaty marked a radical realignment of the Thai traditional posture of up to 1840s. It provided for a great extension for British trading rights and inclusion of the extra-territoriality provision. It was followed by similar agreements with the United States and France in 1856. Contents and procedure of trading in the Treaties completely eliminated the royal trade. The sole but important consequence was to push Thailand into the world economy as a supplier of food and raw materials. A scholar concludes the situation resulted from relations of Thai government and the great powers during this period, that, "*The Thai's role in the economic world became de facto colony*". (Siffin 1966:48) Another analyzes that "..... *Thailand reformed its economic system from an almost self-sufficient economy, to an economy specializing in a few products, and sold them to buy its requirements of other goods.*" (Ingram 1971:36)

The end of the royal monopoly trading caused important losses of the nation's revenues. To make up the losses the government did the following practices: (Skinner 1957:120)

1. Converting the old export monopolies into duty revenue farms
2. Farming out the collection of duties on almost all other exports and imports.
3. Recognizing the collection of the traditional taxes to be monopolies.
4. Creating new taxes, which were also farmed out.

On the other hand, there was some change in economic structure at peasants's level. With the development of an exchange economy, the important new economic function had to be performed namely, the function of taking the products from the peasants, transporting them to the sea ports, selling to the foreign buyers and then buying other goods and bring them back to the peasants. These middle agent functions were carried mostly by Chinese. Western merchants participated in these activities but mostly at the wholesale level, Chinese were by far the most numerous. The Thai participated hardly at all. (Ingram 1971:37)

4. Late Bangkok Period (1868-1932)

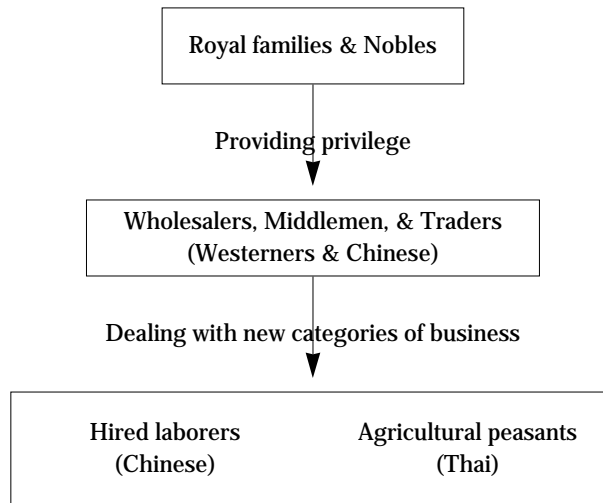
It will be easier to understand this period by viewing the country's changes into two stages, the stage of Chakkri Reformation and the pre-democratic stage.

The Chakkri Reformation

The Bowring Treaty and other similar treaties had greatly affected the Thai market system in the middle of the century. Formation of new interest groups in the society had changed some characteristics. The new social structure of Thai society in the Late Bangkok Period is proposed

in the following figure,

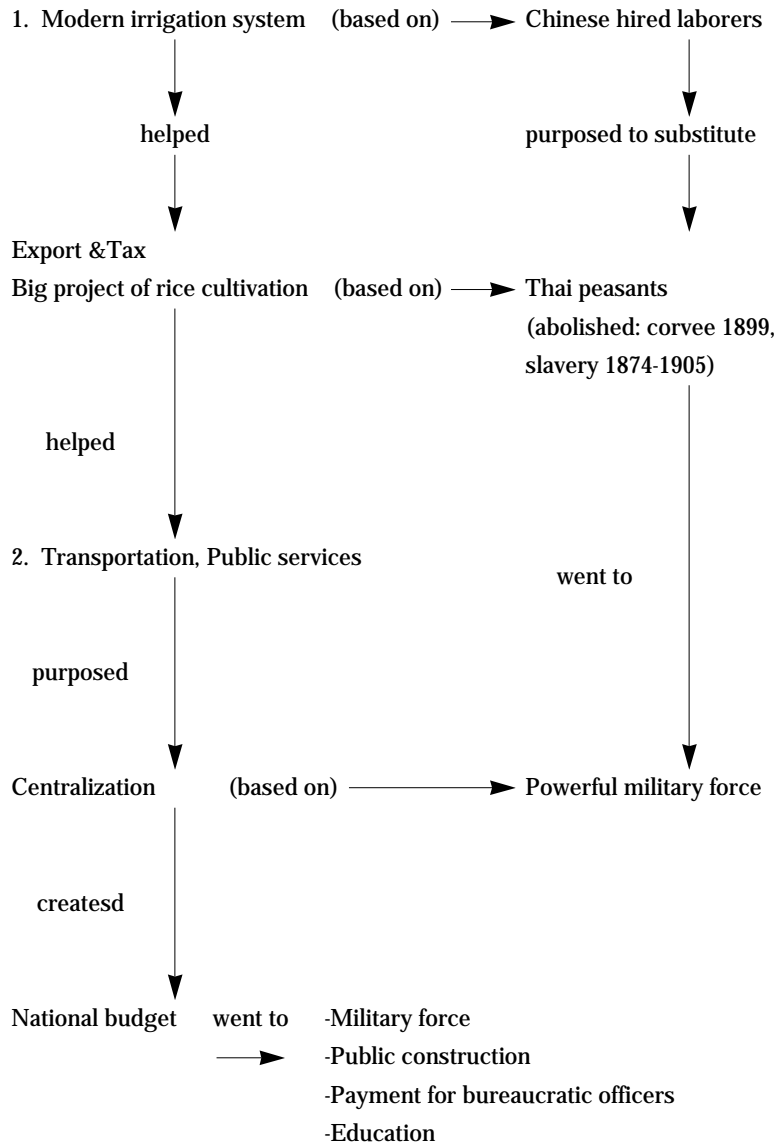
Chart 2. Social Structure in the Late 19th Century



As a matter of fact, the Chinese immigrants were constantly moving into the country so that the Chinese laborers were plentiful, in spite of the fact that some of them continuously moved up to be the higher-leveled merchants and traders. Dhiravegin views the situation of Thai economy in the late 19th century as follows, “*the Chinese controlled the domestic trade, the Thai ruling class on the other hand entered into the economic field as partners with British and Chinese.*” (Dhiravegin1976:31)

King Rama V (1868-1910) realized the serious political situation of the country, that he intended to modernize and strengthen the country strong enough to confront with the colonialist threat. However, it took a long time before the power structure inside the court was arranged in favor for the king to do so. The first of the reformation which was known as the Chakkri Reformation was occurred in 1874, the year in which the king had come to the age without Regency. (Bunnag 1977:56) Rama V emphasized on the modernization of infrastructure, i.e. railroad, roads, canals, telegraphic system, electric plants. The structure of Rama V’s construction of infrastructure is illustrated in figure 3.

Chart 3 .The Construction of Infrastructure of Rama V



To explain the above chart, Rama V's construction of infrastructure was done for two purposes,

1. For agricultural economy

Thailand entered into the world market as a mono-cultural country producing rice. Therefore, the big project of irrigation over the central part of Thailand was set about. Before then, except for the Northern part of the country, there was no irrigational construction. The agricultural produce depended solely on rain and seasonal climate. (Ingram 1971:79-80) Rama V hired Chinese laborers that were available then. The *corvee* labor system was inefficient that the king abolished this system in 1899. At the same time, he gradually abrogated slavery starting in 1847 and completing in 1905.² Exempted from the *corvee* labor and slavery, every Thai citizen obliged to pay capitation tax. Both abolishment of the *corvee* and slavery encouraged people to cultivate and yield agricultural products. To support the people who cultivated new land, they were exempted from land tax for three years.

2. For centralization and administration

Since the important resource areas of forestry and mining were located in the northern and southern provinces of the country, which were closed to the colonial territory of western countries, Rama V found that military power alone were not enough to defend the kingdom. On the other hand, the ministrations of the tributary states, both the outer and the inner provinces had to be unified and centralized in order to forestall the foreign intervention. The administrative changes had to be accomplished in order to ensure the loyalty of the provincial aristocrats, as well as to obtain more resources, which were in hands of these people. (Bunnag 1977:64) The king appointed the commissioners (*kha-laung*) with some military force to almost all of the tributary states and to some of the outer and inner provinces on frontier. (Bunnag 1977:62)

In order to construct the centralized administration, transportation and communication network were urgent and extreme necessity. For this purpose the Ministry of Public Work was established in 1892. (Dhiravegin 1976:31) The new transportation network functioned for transferring the agricultural products for export from rural areas to Bangkok. No wonder the expense scales were large to accommodate the projects. Financial management needed to be reorganized; therefore, the new budget system with a regular audit was introduced. Until 1892, there was no budget planning, little or no auditing system and no separation of the king's personal finances from the general revenues of the country. Started in 1892, the king's personal expenditures were separated from the ordinary government's expenditures. From 1892-1902, after the financial restructuring, the national revenue increased from 15 millions to 40 millions baht without the imposition of any tax. (Ingram 1971:177)

The revenue of Rama V's government derived from two major sources of direct taxes:

1. Land tax and capitation tax, about 8-12% of total revenue. When the *corvee* obligation was converted into the money tax, it became the new important source of revenue.

2. The opium monopoly and gambling farms, about 40% of total revenue. The tax income from commercial services also rose from almost nothing in 1892 to 10% of total revenue in 1926 (Rama VI). (Ingram 1971:178) In 1910, the Chinese were required to pay a regular annual tax instead of the triennial tax they had previously paid.

With the increasing revenue, the king improved the army, accepted the western technology and built the European-styled military school to train professional soldiers. That military school now became the National Military Academy.

It seemed to be that King Rama V then realized that the Sakdina ranking system which had been practiced since Ayuthaya period had deprived the capable commoners from working as officials. It was a traditional practice that a commoner could not become an official. The Royal Decree of 1740 stated that persons who were to serve in official positions must have several qualities. ³The first quality was that he must belong to the family of a chief minister of the past or present. (Rabibhadana 1969:56) It excluded the affined relations. This is a requirement eliminated any commoners away from official affairs. It was not certain whether Rama V revoked this ancient royal decree or not, but he introduced a new idea of public education to Thai people. In order to produce well-trained persons to be hired as officials, the king established a high level school to teach the modern knowledge and technology. This school was opened for all the people and later on it became the first university in Thailand. Besides, Rama V sent many scholarship students to study abroad, mostly in European countries.

This reformation of Rama V was mainly stimulated by the pressure of Western Colonialism. The main promoters to push forward the country were the king himself and some of the modern educated officials. Since these changes were obviously initiated in the upper level and forced down to the lower level, there is no doubt that while this forced structural change speeded up the process of class differentiation in the upper level in Bangkok, the process was not accompanied by the change in class structure in the commoner level. People's lives, ways of thinking, and beliefs at the rural community level remained traditional.

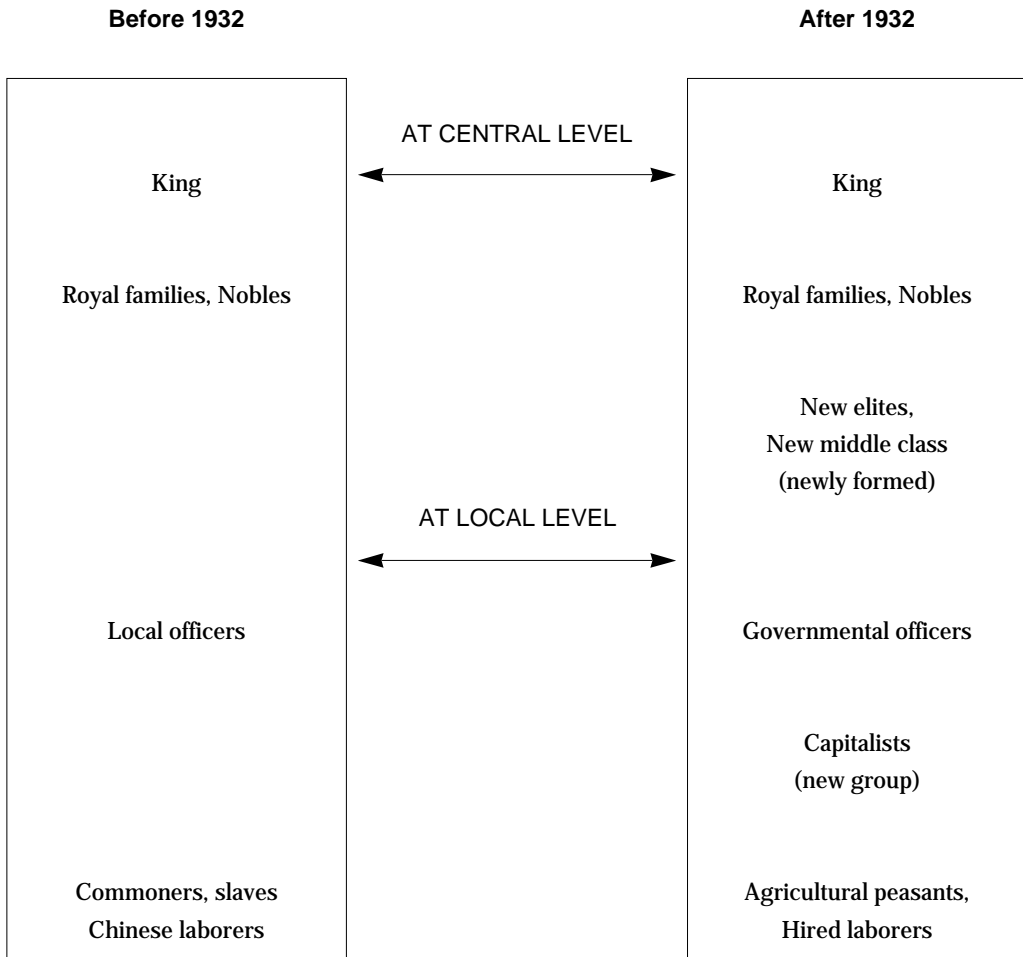
The Pre-democratic Stage

The results of the reformation during Rama V's reign can be seen in this period. The young men, educated in western countries and in domestic higher educational institutions began to form a new elite group among the officials. These new elites were strongly influenced by the western political ideology. As they expected that Rama VI (1910-1925) would follow Rama V's resolution to change the absolute monarchy into democratic monarchy. When they realized that Rama VI ignored their expectation, the frustration of the new young elites were accumulated, being the one condition of the political change in the next decade. In 1920s, the world economy was demolished by the great depression and Thailand was confronted by double economic difficulty. Then Rama VII (1925-1935) tried to overcome the financial problem by cutting the national budget in civil and military service and his own expenditures. This resulted in the prevalence of dissatisfaction in all governmental officials. In 1932, a group of officials who called themselves "the People's Party" took chance of this situation to do the coup d'etat. They forced the king to sign the Constitution, to form a new government to rule the country with ideology of constitutional democracy.

The members of the People's Party were new officials, most of whom had been educated in France. Their ideas were strongly influenced by the Russian revolution in 1917 and the democratic revolution in China in 1911. The People's Party at the time it seized power issued a

manifesto which set forth a six-point program aiming to create the total democratization of the country. If we consider the whole structure of Thai society during the first few decades of the 20th century, we can see little change in structure of the entire society. Few changes were made only among the ruling class. After this political change in 1932, the most powerful group of the society was not that of the royal and the nobles any more. Political power was shifted to the well-educated commoners. The supporters of the new elites were the modern educated people who were then going to become a new middle class. The following chart illustrates the difference of two structural societies of Thailand in two periods.

Chart 4. Comparison of the Two Social Structures in Thailand Before and After 1932



Notes

- 1 the Bhramanistic symbol of the supreme deity
- 2 In 1874 an act was passed whereby the values of 'slaves' born in 1868 was depreciated progressively to nothing by 1889 when, on reaching the age of twenty-one, they were automatically to become free citizens. cf. Bunnag 1977:57
- 3 The other qualities were: a. he must have good knowledge in both military and civil matters, b. he must be intelligent, c. he must be of good morals, d. he must seek whatever the king desired and bring it to the king, e. he must be diligent in his work, f. he must be brave in battle, g. he must be wise in giving judgment in litigation and clever in his work. cf. Rabibhadana 1969:156

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