

MONGKUT, CHULALONGKORN AND THE GENERATIONS OF SIAM REFORMERS IN THE PREMODERN PERIOD

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The premodern history of the Kingdom of Thailand is closely associated with the names of King Mongkut (Rama IV, 1851-1868), Chulalongkorn (Rama V, 1868-1910) and three generations of reformers who successfully led the modernization cause of Siam Kingdom (former name of Thailand) which helped this kingdom overcome the hazard of invasion from colonialism. Nowadays, Thai people still worship these two kings as Buddha-Emperors who enlightened and set the foundation for the birth of modern Thai.

This article focuses on studying the biography, career and especially elements which have created the talent of these two kings as well as the generations of national talent who successfully led this famous movement of reform. Based on this, it is possible to make remarks on the importance of national talent in this movement of reform in premodern Siam in order to gain historic experiences for the strategy of talent development in Vietnam nowadays.

1. Historical background, biography and the process of becoming talents of Mongkut and Chulalongkorn

Chulalongkorn was born on September 20th in 1853. His father was

King Mongkut (Rama IV). Totally Mongkut had 39 wives and 82 children including 43 princesses and 39 princes. Chulalongkorn was not the first son of Mongkut. However, because he was the first son born to Queen Rampoey, he was the official successor of Mongkut.

The talent and career of Chulalongkorn was firstly associated with the talent and personality of his father, and the story of King Mongkut was also one of the most interesting ones in the premodern period of Thailand.

Mongkut was not the first son either. However, he was the first son born to the Queen and King Rama II (1809-1824). He was 20 when his father passed away. It was also the period when Siam kingdom under the ruling of Chakri dynasty was facing vital challenges. At the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, Western capitalism invasion and colonialization were at their height in East Asia. Among colonialist nations, Britain and France were the most powerful. Many countries and peoples in this region were conquered and dominated while others were facing the hazard of being attacked, invaded or divided.

Chakri dynasty was founded in 1782, which put an end to a chaotic time in the

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history of this country after the collapse of Ayudhya dynasty and the dominance of the Burman. Under the reigns of Rama I and Rama II, Siam kingdom recovered quickly and reached the peak of decentralistic Buddhist mornachy. The territory was more extended than ever before. However, this was also the time when Western colonialists began to pay attention to Siam and threaten the independence of this kingdom[1, p.113]. In 1822, British colonialist government in India sent a mission led by John Crawford to Bangkok to ask for permission to trade. However, nobody in Rama II's court could understand English [1, p.114]. The failure of the negotiation made Crawford leave in fury, which foretold that a real hazard was on its way. Soon after that Rama II fell ill and the white elephant, the sacred symbol of the Royal family, also died.

As if he could predict future events, Rama II made decisions which. He did not designate Mongkut as his successor although Mongkut was the only official crown prince. On the contrary, he ordered Mongkut to shave his head and become a monk, then designated his eldest son (who was 43 at that time) to be the successor to the throne.

After his accession to the throne, Rama III (1824-1851) always remembered his father's recommendation to be "absolutely cautious about the relationship with Western countries". It seemed that he also predicted this challenge in the future, so he didn't designate a viceroy

(due to the tradition of the mornachy in Siam, the incumbent king always designates a viceroy to be the successor in case the king dies unexpectedly). It was likely that he implicitly reserved this position for Mongkut, who should have been the successor of Rama II.

As for Mongkut, after following his father's order to shave his head and become a monk, he immediately devoted all of his mind and strength to this career. However, he did it in his own way. First of all, he tried his best to study Pali, a kind of dead language which costs an ordinary monk many years to master if he wants to understand Buddhist scripture. However, with his prominent talent, Mongkut only took less than 2 years to master Pali and then passed the examination of Buddhist Supreme Council to become the leader of Buddhist Church of this kingdom. Also during this time, he got acquainted with a French missionary named Mosignor Pallegoix. He taught Mosignor Pali and Thai while the missionary taught him English, French, Latin and some Western fundamental sciences. Besides, he also made acquaintance with other several Western missionaries to learn scientific knowledge from them. He learned these strange knowledge and languages with special intelligence and wisdom.

At the end of 1825, the second British mission led by Henry Burney was sent to Bangkok to make negotiation and request Siam to open the country for trade. At that time

British colonialists had just declared the first invasion to conquer Burma. The negotiation lasted for nearly a year and came to a standstill. However, when British army won the war and forced Emperor of Burma to sign a peace treaty, Rama III invited Mongkut to join the negotiation and he cleverly convinced both sides to sign a treaty in 1826 which minimized disadvantages for Siam.

Mongkut also promptly forwarded two things which later played decisive roles in the reform of him and his son. First, he declared the reform in the Buddhist Church of Siam towards eliminating the superstition, stagnation and degradation of the clergy and restoring the rationalism and secularism of primitive Buddhism. As a result, after years of consistent persuasion, Mongkut founded and became the leader of a new sect called Dhammayaut which gathered Siam reformatory chapters together. *Second, he gathered around himself a force* including several young princes and members of most powerful aristocrat families, especially the Bunnag, to focus on studying Western languages, sciences and technology. This was the first step in the preparation of talents which were one of the decisive factors determining the destiny of the reform afterwards [1, p.119; 2, p.117].

After the Opium War (1839-1842), Western colonialist countries intensified the race to invade Asia and fought with one another over remaining lands to make them their colonies. The pressure on national sovereignty of kingdoms

such as China, Vietnam, Siam, Burma, etc., increased day by day. In pagodas, Mongkut, Chuang Bunnag and the group of young aristocrat intellectuals implicitly monitored latest incidents in the world and the region and they became more positive in studying Western learning.

In April 1851, Rama III passed away. With the strong support of powerful aristocrat forces, especially Bunnag lineage, Mongkut gave up the frock and came to the throne crowned as Rama IV.

Right after his accession to the throne, Mongkut had to face with strong pressure from Western colonialism. In the years 1850 and 1851, British colonialists continuously sent missions to Bangkok to ask Chakri dynasty to open the country for trade. In March 1855, another mission led by John Bowring was sent to Bangkok to demand for trade. This demand was pertained with the public threat of violent attack. At the same time, British army declared the Second invasion to annex Burma.

When Bowring arrived in Bangkok, the manner of Siam court changed completely. King Mongkut and Minister of Foreign Affairs and South East Chuang Phraya Bunnag (Suriyawong) themselves welcomed him at the wharf. During the talk afterwards, the King himself even offered Boring coffee, cigars and began the talk by narrating in English what he had read in the *Hongkong Daily* that day. All of this made a special impression on Bowring about an innovated and trusty court. In

April 1855, the new treaty between Siam and Britain was signed, in which Mongkut decided to strongly reduce import-export tax and ensure the free trade while Britain pledged to recognize Siam's sovereignty over peripheral areas in the North of Malaysian peninsula and Northeast Burma. Afterwards, Siam also signed a series of similar treaties with France, The United States, Denmark, Portugal and the Netherlands. These treaties created significant changes in the trade between Siam and Western countries. If in 1852 only three Western merchant ships arrived at Bangkok port, this figure in 1856 was 200. As a result, a reform in the aspects of tax system, services, etc. became imperative [1, p.122].

So, the reform really began. Mongkut actively invited dozens of specialists from Western countries to Siam to work as advisors for him and the court in many aspects, including legislation, administration, diplomacy and especially military. A special school was established for princes and members of aristocrat families under the direct guidance of Western lecturers. The king and royal family also directly invested in several services.

However, Mongkut and Chuang Bunnag understood clearly that it was not easy for conservative forces, especially the aristocracy, to accept the reform towards westernization. Consequently, although Mongkut knew exactly the way of the reform, he was still very cautious and only implemented

reforms the success of which was absolutely ensured.

It appeared that Mongkut understood the mission of forwarding the reform would be put on the shoulders of his successor. As a result, he set up a special training program for the crown prince Chulalongkorn very early. This training program was designed by Mongkut himself based on his own experiences of self-education in order to create most favourable preparation for Chulalongkorn to become an innovative king who could face with challenges in the near future.

Chulalongkorn began to learn under the guidance of Thai Royal lecturers when he was only 7. He received the education and special traditional training reserved for princes in many aspects, such as Thai writing, Pali, royal practices, rituals, Buddhism, historical chronicles, official regulations, the art of fencing and methods of military command. Besides, he also studied at a special school under the guidance of Western missionaries and professors. He learned from them fundamental scientific knowledge, English and French. Mongkut even had some Western tutors to teach this young crown prince directly. Among them, perhaps Mrs Anna Leonowens, a British professor, was most instrumental on the development of knowledge and personality of the future king. She had been living continuously in the Royal Palace during the 5 year period from 1862 to 1867 to teach Chulalongkorn [1, p.124].

However, the real “teacher” who had the greatest influence on Chulalongkorn’s talent, personality and stuff was no other than his father, King Mongkut. Mongkut always kept his son by his side since Chulalongkorn was only 7. After school time, this prince, together with his father, normally dealt with daily matters of the kingdom so that he could understand the ruling method. Mongkut also step by step taught Chulalongkorn the method and the indispensable way of reforming the country as well as how to have relationship with Western countries. He even wanted to pass his passion of studying Western sciences to his son. On August 18, 1868, Mongkut invited some of his Western friends to travel with him to Wa Kaw to observe an eclipse and he brought Prince Chulalongkorn along. Unfortunately, both he and his son contracted malaria in this trip. After returning to Bangkok, Mongkut passed away on January 10, 1868. Chulalongkorn, who was lucky to survive, came to the throne at the age of 15.

2. The reform of Chulalongkorn and the next generations of talents

Chulalongkorn became King when he was only 15, so he didn’t hold the real power yet. The real power then fell into the hand of Regent Chaophraya Si Suriyawong (Chuang Bunnag). In fact, Chuang Bunnag was also the backbone of the reform faction who had stood by the side of Mongkut for dozens of years. However, he didn’t intend to carry out

radical reforms but only wanted to make certain changes in several policies to make peace with Western countries as well as to protect the benefits of Bunnag lineage and Thai aristocracy.

During the first 5 years Chulalongkorn still concentrated on study and implicitly gathered his force. He made acquaintance with a group of young princes and some aristocratical youths, drove them to follow him to study Western modern sciences and travelled with them to visit colonies such as Java (Indonesia) of the Netherlands and Singapore, India and Burma of Britain. During these trips Chulalongkorn and aristocratical youths (sometimes the number of the delegation was over 70) observed with their own eyes and acquired substantial first-hand experiences of useful things in ruling art, administration and Western paradigm of the economy, industry, services and the modality of military and education organization which the British, Dutch and Portuguese were applying in neighbour colonies [1, p.125].

In 1873, when he was 18, Chulalongkorn celebrated his second enthronement and began to hold the real power himself. The young king eagerly started the reform following what his father had just began. He declared the abolishment of slavery and the practice of kowtow in the court, changed the style of court attire and set up a State council and a Privy council which consisted of princes and young reformatory aristocrats as his two consultant

agencies. Chulalongkorn also declared the reform in the tax system, gathered financial resources in the hand of the central government, made changes in judicial system, etc.

Such significant reforms created new vitality and driving force of development for the kingdom. Youth, merchants and peasants strongly approved these reforms and supported the young king. However, the reforms had made a shock to the conservative aristocracy. Especially, the abolishment of slavery and the change in financial system had directly attacked their benefits and power. As a result, these conservative forces concentrated around viceroy Wichaichan and then launched a revolt in an attempt to overthrow King Chulalongkorn in 1875.

Although Wichaichan's revolt was unsuccessful, it was a strict warning to Chulalongkorn's hasty steps. He realized that the reformatory forces hadn't been strong enough. So, he temporarily delayed reform plans and gathered forces for the next steps. According to that, many princes were sent abroad to study. For example, Prince Vajiravuth studied military science and history in Britain, other 4 princes and some aristocrat members studied military and sciences in Germany, Russia, Denmark, etc. After they had finished their study and returned, Chulalongkorn immediately appointed them to important positions in the government which their fathers and uncles were holding. Thus Chulalongkorn not only

succeeded in training talents for the reform but also peacefully staged a coup d'état to overthrow the conservative forces and brought the reformatory faction to power.

Based on this, from 1880s, after most key-figures of conservative aristocrat factor were already dead, including late Recent Chuang Bunnag, Chulalongkorn started a new period of the reform.

This time, thanks to more careful preparation with stronger reformatory force including mainly princes, the king's brothers and members of large aristocrat families, Chulalongkorn implemented more intensive reforms in various aspects of economics, politics, education, etc. In 1885, he decided to reorganize central government system, abolish the decentralistic monarchy, set up centralistic one and establish ministries to undertake different functions of the government like a Western cabinet. Ministers were all princes and the king's brothers who had returned after their training in Europe. Afterwards, Chulalongkorn also implemented the reform in local authorities system to gather power in the hand of central government. This reform changed the descent of local mandarins from hereditary lords to mandarins who were appointed, paid and could be dismissed by the court[2, p.184].

While the first period of the reform cause had just been started, British colonialism also declared the Third invasion to annex Burma and completed

their 30-year conquest. In order to relieve the pressure from the West and the Southwest, Siam had to give up many peripheral territories contiguous with Burma to British colonialism. In the East, French colonialism had also completed the conquest over Vietnam and Cambodia. In 1887 they annexed Laos. It is worth noticing that at that time Laos and Cambodia were still considered dependent territories of Siam. The conflict between Siam army and French forces on the side of Mekong river made the relationship between Siam and France become terribly strained. In July 1893, French battleships crossed Chaophraya estuary and then went upstream to Bangkok. This time, to save the destiny of the kingdom, Chulalongkorn had to entreat help from Britain to mediate with France. As a result, Siam had to give up all peripheral territories to British and French colonialism. Chulalongkorn only ruled the territory of Thailand nowadays which is about a half of the territory ruled by Rama III [2,p.185-186].

Due to the pressure from Western colonialism, Chulalongkorn's reform had to slow down once again. The King himself fell into a serious mental crisis because so many territories had been lost to the hands of British and French colonialism. He once had the intention of leaving his throne. However, after several years of recuperation with the help of Royal family and Buddhist Church, he recovered and, since 1898, continued the next steps of his reform.

In fact, even while the king was in crisis, princes such as Damrong and Devawongse were still forwarding the reform and continued to strengthen the government system, legislation and military. Especially, education made rapid progress. Thousands of new schools following Western model were constructed all over the kingdom. If the number of pupils in 1898 was only 5000, it increased to 84.000 in 1910 [2, p.186].

One of the most important aspects in Chulalongkorn's reform was foreign affairs. Like his father, Chulalongkorn had prepared himself very early with vast and regularly undated knowledge of Western cultures, sciences, languages and politics in order to be in contact with Western countries at the high level of this age. He actively hired hundreds of Western specialists to Bangkok to help the court in the aspects of economics, education and foreign affairs. He even hired many Westerners to work as Siam ambassadors in Western countries. The King himself usually exchanged mails with French Emperor, British Queen, Prussian Emperor, the Czar and other Western high-ranking politicians. Sometimes Siam was saved thanks to these personal relationships, for instance in 1875 and 1892-1893 crises [1, p.125].

The decisive aspect of reform in Siam modernization in this period was the economic reform. Chulalongkorn and Chakri court bravely invited Western countries to invest in railroads, motorways and production which set the

foundation for modern industry. The royal family itself also invested in many fields. These factors paved the way for the capitalization of Siam. When Chulalongkorn passed away on October 23, 1910, the foundation for the development of Siam towards capitalization and modernization had been firmly set. Chulalongkorn's reform started by his father Mongkut since 1851 was fundamentally completed. Although its success was not as spectacular as Japan's Meiji renovation, it was enough not only to bring Siam out of the invasion hazard from Western countries but also to open the way and set the foundation for the birth of a modern Thailand.

3. Some comments on Chulalongkorn and generations of Siam talents in premodern period

The most prominent characteristic of the successful reform in Siam in the premodern period was the thorough personnel preparation. Talented reformers of Siam from the generation of Mongkut and Chuang Bunnag, then the generation of Chulalongkorn, princes Damrong and Devawongse, to the generation of Vajiravuth and many other young aristocrats, were all thoroughly trained.

However, each generation of talents above was trained in different ways. To the generation of Mongkut và Chuang Bunnag, self-study and self-training played the most decisive role, while the

talents of Chulalongkorn generation were the outcome of clever mixture among self-study, self-training and a training process following an itinerary which had already been designed with proper curricula and a painstaking tutor program. As for the third generation, their talent was mainly formed through their study abroad at top-ranking universities and colleges in Europe.

The special point was that Mongkut generation designed the training for and wisely used Chulalongkorn generation, and in turn, this generation also concentrated on designing the plan to train the next generations for the reform. It was Siam's strategy of talents in the premodern period, one of the factors which decided its reform cause. It was also a profound example for the innovation of our country nowadays.

Although they were the outcome of different training itineraries, all talents in the reform of Siam in the premodern period had 2 important characteristics, and they were also prominent characteristics in King Chulalongkorn's personality and talent.

First, they were the outcome of training itineraries with clear purposes. Whether they were self-trained or trained following a pre-designed itinerary, all of them had clear awareness of the mission they had to undertake in the future, that meant, the mission of leading and implementing the reform and modernization of the country following Western paradigm. This was the solution which they regarded as the

only way to save their country. This awareness created their great ambition and based on that foundation, they prepared for themselves necessary knowledge, skills and stuff in order to finally train themselves as talents who could satisfy the demands set up by this mission. It was a lesson with great practical significance for the talent strategy of our country today.

Second, although itineraries of training talents in Siam in the premodern period were different from one another, they had the same characteristic, that is, the clever mixture between two factors: the traditional and the modern, the nation and the age. This characteristic was concentratedly manifested by Mongkut and his son Chulalongkorn. Thanks to this characteristic, Chulalongkorn and Siam reformers were very successful in applying what they had learnt into practice. They were Western educated intellectuals who could keep pace with the age in the aspect of knowledge, but first of all they were all members of Thai aristocracy who always associated themselves with national and royal traditions. As a result, they could understand the demand of their kingdom and knew how to promote their own ability in the most appropriate way. It is another lesson which is valuable for the cause of talent development of our country today.

Another special issue which can be inferred from the career of Chulalongkorn and the success of the

reform in Siam was how to use talents. In fact, it is an important part which decides the success of the whole strategy of talent development of every country in any ages. The success of the reform in Siam originated from the fact that the royal family and the aristocracy were consistent in honoring and using the talented Mongkut. If Mongkut hadn't been enthroned in 1851, the history of Siam would have followed another direction. After that, the training and use of new generations of talents were carefully planned and consistently supported. Certainly, the obstacles hindering this strategy were quite considerable, including conservative forces and invaders. There were even times when the reformatory faction seemed to lose completely. In these cases, it was prodigious talents of Siam who knew how themselves could be used most efficiently. As for Mongkut, his secret was to take advantage of the Buddhist Church's support at first. Then he actively made balance between forces, forwarded the reform at appropriate rate and didn't challenge all opponents at the same time.

Mongkut's key to success was acquired and radically taken advantage of by Chulalongkorn. However, based on practical situations, Chulalongkorn was even more creative in promoting the relationships with Western heads of state in order to take advantage of them to escape from dangers caused by the coercion from conservative forces and colonialism when necessary.

The biography of reformatory talents in Siam was also a noticeable factor. It was not just by chance that Mongkut and Chulalongkorn concentrated on training generations of young aristocrats into talented reformers. This related to their positions in Siam political system. As aristocrats, they could be easily approved to hold critical ruling positions to replace conservative aristocrat forces. As a result, the transfer of political power from conservative faction to reformatory faction happened relatively smooth. Just try to imagine if Siam

reformers had not belonged to the aristocracy, it would have been likely that their talent wouldn't have got a deserving job and it would have been very difficult for the reform to succeed. It was one of the fundamental reasons which led to the failure of reformatory tendencies in Vietnam and China in the premodern period. It is an issue which needs attention in the cause of talent development in our country nowadays, especially in the aspects of management and leadership.

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