

FAMILY POLITICS IN SEVENTEENTH- AND EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY SIAM

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One of the most difficult of the historiographical problems that bedevil the work of historians of premodern Siam is the almost exclusively royal-centered quality of his sources. The chronicles in particular focus heavily upon the doings of kings and rarely give much attention to other, less-exalted individuals and groups. The apparent lack of information, or the historian's neglect of such information as does occur, has made it difficult to assess accurately the political, social, and economic dimensions of Thai history, particularly in the Ayudhya period. Until we begin to get beneath the surface of that history, figuratively to dig behind and beneath the throne, we cannot approach a true understanding of Ayudhya's history.

In the face of somewhat intractable and opaque sources, I began some years ago to attack a comparable problem in the history of Siam in the nineteenth century by looking at "Family Politics in Nineteenth Century Thailand."¹ Utilizing mainly genealogical sources, and applying what have come to be known as prosopographical techniques in a very rudimentary manner, I was interested in exploring the family relationships that seemed to me to undergird politics (and economics) in the Bangkok period (1782–present). I focused particularly on the rise of the Bunnag family and its domination over the politics of the reigns of kings Mongkut and Chulalongkorn. It was not until a year or so after I had published that article that I began to find additional information on the ministerial families, that is, the leading noble families, of the late Ayudhya period (about 1610–1767). The most important source of new information was a large volume entitled *Mahāmukkkhamāttayānukūnlawong*, roughly translated as "History of the Great Ministerial Families," by that enigmatic amateur man of letters of the late nineteenth century, K.S.R. Kulāp (Kulāp Kritsanānon).² In nearly eight hundred typographically florid pages, Kulāp provides many details about the important ministerial families of Ayudhya and Bangkok, including a great deal of

material concerned with these families in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. However, Kulāp's unreliability is well known, and it would have been foolish for me to have accepted his information uncritically, without external, independent corroboration.³ Accordingly, for some years I was loath to carry this line of research further.

Within the past year I have been drawn back to this problem, owing mainly to difficulties I have been having in writing the history of Siam in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In trying to get away from an exclusively court-centered, royal-centered history and understand the politics—in the broadest sense of that word—of the Kingdom of Ayudhya, it has been necessary to try to identify other groups and individuals and to assess their role in that society. The desirability of doing so becomes immediately apparent when one considers the politics of the succession to the throne of the kingdom. Note that from 1610 to the fall of Ayudhya in 1767 virtually every succession to the throne was contested; and in no case could a king come to the throne without some support from the nobles (*khunnāng*), the officials of the capital, and, to a certain extent, the provinces. Who were these people? Were they simply a random, constantly changing collection of individuals? Or did they have group or family identities extending over several generations? On what was their power based? How did their situations, and their power, change over time? And what were their relationships to the families that came to power in the Bangkok period?

In trying to answer such questions, I have had to return to Kulāp's book, supported now by limited external, independent corroboration of some of his data. Without going into the full details, let me briefly summarize two examples. First, as I explained in a review article a few years ago, some of Kulāp's information concerning the early history of the ancestors of the Bunnag family in the seventeenth century are confirmed by a Persian account of a mission to Siam in 1685, which explicitly mentions several individuals also mentioned by Kulāp.⁴ Second, Kulāp presents an exceedingly detailed account of a certain Chinese family that began trading to Siam in the reign of King Thai Sa (reigned 1709–33), from whom are descended a number of high officials in the Phrakhlāng ministry, including a certain Čhaophrayā Phrakhlāng (Chim). This latter individual turns up by full name both in the Ayudhya chronicles and in the genealogy of a family into which he married.⁵ Such reassurances as these have led me to look again at Kulāp's book, and to consider again the "family politics"

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of a later Ayudhya period.

I will not trouble you now with tedious genealogical details, many of which are represented in the accompanying chart and table. Let me instead draw your attention to four themes that now seem to me to emerge out of this information culled from Kulāp and similar sources, all of which seem to underline strong continuities in Siamese history.

First, I am struck by the ethnic diversity of Ayudhya's nobles. There are four major ministerial families--that is, families whose members rose to the rank of *čhaophrayā* (roughly, "minister of state") in at least two generations--and all four of them are non-Thai in origin. The Persian (or Arabo-Persian) origins of the Bunnag and related families are well known. Down to the end of the Ayudhya period they produced at least five *čhaophrayā*, and their daughters married two others. A second family I have referred to elsewhere as the "Brahman" family was descended from Brahmans who came from India. They are the ancestors of the Singhaseni, Chantharot-wong, Buranasiri, Thong-In, and Siritwatthanakun families, among others, and they accounted for seven *čhaophrayā* and another by marriage. A third family, notable for two Čhaophrayā Phrakhlāng (Lek and Pan) of Narai's and Phetracha's reigns, was of Mon origin, and from them descended the kings of the Chakri dynasty. A fourth, the Chinese family mentioned above, included at least three *čhaophrayā*, and they also are included among the ancestors of the Chakri kings. All four of these families, then, are of foreign origin. All four were at least initially involved to some degree with the Phrakhlāng ministry (the government office that dealt with foreign trade), and particularly with branches of the Phrakhlāng that had special responsibility for foreign trading communities resident in Siam. Indeed, the "Persian" and "Chinese" families continued to control at least portions (the Krom Thā Khwā and Krom Thā Sāi, respectively) of the Phrakhlāng's responsibilities and perquisites down to the nineteenth century. This particular phenomenon compels some modification of the accepted characterization of the premodern Siamese bureaucracy as being founded primarily on the control of manpower, for to at least some limited degree these families' power was based not on manpower but on commerce and money. I am especially struck by the extent to which the members of these families, and of families like them with roots in resident foreign communities, frequently played important roles in succession disputes, not least of all the so-called Siamese Revolution of 1688, which put King Phetracha on the throne. Their

durable prominence over a long period of time compels a reconsideration of the “dynastic” politics of the late Ayudhya period.

Second, if we recognize that long-standing noble families were prominent in court politics over generations, we need to consider to what extent royal policies were framed in response or reaction to them. Busakorn Lailert has moved in this direction with her treatment of the dynasty founded by Phetracha, and has interpreted the furnishing of princes with direct control over manpower (through personal *krom*) as royal attempts to counter noble power.⁶ In a recent paper, Nidhi Aeusrivongse has done the same with respect to the reign of King Narai and those of some of his predecessors.⁷ Nidhi draws a useful distinction between the “administrative” bureaucracy and the “skilled” or “professional” bureaucracy, the latter being almost exclusively of foreign origin. He outlines the competition between the interests of the two, and royal attempts to manipulate the differences between them. In short, our appreciation of the politics of Ayudhya has begun to widen by looking not just at kings and their quarrelsome heirs but at the main interest groups at court.

Third, the chief noble families of the late Ayudhya period demonstrate considerable continuity and strength. Generation after generation, their members held high office. Moreover, when there were no sons to succeed their fathers in office, their daughters married into powerful “outside” families that had risen to high office. The data suggest the existence of at least the core of a cohesive nobility, a group with traditions of power and service to the crown, who competed among themselves but at the same time could maximize their power as a group vis-à-vis both the king and upwardly mobile “outsiders.”

Finally, it is perhaps most intriguing that all four of the main families with which we have been concerned intermarried with the Chakri family *before* 1782 when Rama I ascended the throne of Siam. The implications of this fact may prove to be of paramount significance, for it suggests that the Bangkok monarchy was well rooted in the nobility of late Ayudhya in a way that none of its predecessors were. No wonder, then, that the Bangkok kings seem to have had a much closer working relationship with their nobles than the Ayudhya kings had, nor that the same families that were prominent in the late Ayudhya period continued to gain in power under the Bangkok monarchy.