

## CHAPTER VIII CONCLUSION

In 1782 Bangkok was established as Siam's new capital by Rama I. It was a capital city very much in traditional pre-modern mould, centred on the king and the royal palaces. It looked backwards as well as forwards. Buildings from Ayutthaya were copied, and materials from that destroyed city were brought to the new capital.

By 1970 Bangkok was indubitably a modern city, holding a supreme place in the fast-growing Thai economy. Bangkok was not only a "primate city" but one of the world's foremost primate cities. This thesis traces Bangkok's metamorphosis from pre-modern royal capital to a primate city. The early sections deal with the pre-Bowring period, and show that despite the traditional nature of Siamese economy and society, some of the origins of Bangkok's economic primacy can be traced to this period. There were three key elements. First, from the early years of the 19th century much of Siam's wealth was trade-based. Secondly, much of this trade was in hands of the king and his family and close associates. This in turn assured that trade would be centred on Bangkok, and this was enhanced by the importance of the great Chaophraya river, flowing through the fertile central plain to Bangkok. Thirdly, from an early period, Chinese immigrants (there were others but the Chinese were overwhelmingly the most important) played a very significant role in Bangkok's development, bringing capital, enterprise and skills as well as labour.

This thesis has discussed aspects of the economic history of Bangkok from its foundations until recent times. The most notable feature of Bangkok has been its ascendancy and "primacy" in relation to other centres in the country.

In attempting to explain primacy, we have identified a number stages by which primacy was established, consolidated, and transformed.

Briefly, these stages include (1) traditional, pre-modern Bangkok, very much in the mould of older Southeast Asian capital cities, (2) the growth of Bangkok as a major port-city, typical of the "colonial" period of the international economy, (3) Bangkok's development as a manufacturing centre based on cheap rural labour, and (4) the emergence of a modern, sophisticated Bangkok as the capital of a new Asian tiger.

Throughout the thesis the dual threads of political and economic influences have been stressed. Indeed, Takashi Tomosugi perceptively that from the outset in 1782 the old name "Bangkok" had an economic significance, while the new and usually employed Thai name "Krungthep"(city of angles) had an artificial, divine connotation<sup>1</sup>. And Bangkok grew subsequently with these two influences intertwined.

Early Bangkok was built on the Ayutthaya pattern, laid out in cosmological fashion on Rattanakosin island. Later developments modified, but never destroyed the spiritual side and significance of Bangkok.

The thesis brings out the overwhelming importance of geography in consolidating Bangkok's economic position, especially the capital city's situation near the Gulf of Thailand on the country's major river. Bangkok, especially outside the palace area, grew up largely unplanned and unministered until the 1890s. This means that the scholar has no easy access to administrative archives, since the most of the 19th century none ever existed. Rather, in tracing the economic history of Bangkok, a vast range of miscellaneous, often incomplete, and often confusing documentation has to be employed. This thesis has drawn on many archival source, including the hitherto little known papers of the Ministry of the Capital.

In Chapter 2 we looked at the main factors inducing economic change in Bangkok in the period before the 1850s. We showed that Bangkok consolidated itself both as royal capital and economic centre. As far as the economy was concerned, of particular was trade, (internal and external), the collection of royal dues (Suay), canal construction, and the flow of immigrants from China.

Bangkok's geographical position gave it control of the products which flowed down the ChaoPhraya river to the Gulf of Thailand. At the same time, the collection of Suay (much of it emanating from distant provinces) produced a flow of commodities which could be sold abroad. In fact, Suay was for much of the period the main source of exportable commodities (especially forest products). Because foreign trade was a royal monopoly, and because Suay was a royal privilege, the expansion of foreign trade

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<sup>1</sup>Takashi, Reminiscences,1993,p. 8.

necessarily both kingly interests (the King himself, his family and close associates) and Bangkok.

Canal construction was a notable feature of Bangkok from an early stage, and by the 1820s a network of canals served both defensive and commercial purposes. In succeeding years, and especially in the early 1850s (before the Bowring Treaty), an expanding canal network greatly increased the physical area and economic strength of Bangkok.

From the very outset Chinese influence was strong in Bangkok. A Chinese settlement had been moved to make way for the construction of the royal compound on Rattanakosin Island in 1782, and this settlement soon became the commercial hub of the capital (Sampeng). The Thonburi period had seen the arrival of many Chinese, and opportunities opened up by canal and temple construction and shipbuilding ensured a flow of Chinese immigrants which gave Bangkok resources of labour, skills and enterprise.

In all, then, was far from stagnant before the 1850s, and grew in population, wealth and area. Chapter 2 discussed population estimates and concluded that the population may have reached some 100,000 by 1850. However, a good portion of this population was transient, and many lived an aquatic on the river.

Chapter 3 traced further the physical development of Bangkok from the 1850s, in the post-Bowring period. Here the most point brought out was the great change in both the physical and economic development of the capital from around 1890. In stressing this, we are stressing also the inadequacy of traditional Thai historiography, which usually periodises in terms of royal reigns rather than from the perspective of economic turning points.

During the second half of the 19th century Bangkok's development was strongly influenced by Siam's absorption into the international economy. Bangkok, along with Rangoon and Saigon developed as the world's great rice ports. Such developments had far-reaching consequences. On the other hand, various trading activities such as port facilities, warehouses, ship-repairing, rice mills, and so on, developed along the river as trade expanded. On the other hand, capital and labour were attracted to the city. The period from

the mid-century saw growing western influence. Foreign trading companies were established, and certain modern amenities began to make their appearance in the city. Labour flowed from China in increasing numbers at a time when the Siamese countryside was still underpopulated.

We may add that the "Chinese" character of Bangkok, which long remained such a significant feature of the city from at least the 1880s, was strengthened by various factors. These included the strong trade links to the Chinese ports, including Hong Kong, and also with Singapore, which was commercially closely tied with China. Bangkok's links with all these regions was cemented by the establishment of direct steam shipping lines during the second half of the 19th century.

The period around 1890 saw some crucial developments. A significant one was the decision by the king to promote reforms which would centralise administrative control in Bangkok. Formerly semi-independent provinces such as Chiang Mai, Lampang, Phuket, were brought within Bangkok's orbit through the appointment of governors from Bangkok, centralised tax collecting, and other measures. These changes have been discussed by Tej Bunnag<sup>2</sup> and are consequently not elaborated here. But in addition to the political dimension there was an economic one. Bangkok was to become a modern capital in other senses. Growing wealth from the rice trade, from centralised taxes, and from the influx of Chinese migrants, provided resources for a notable extension of the city. This expansion had its physical expression in the construction of new canals and city streets. The streets were of considerable importance since, for the first time, Bangkok began to lose its all-embracing connection with water and became a land-based city. Land-based activities, including building construction, tramways, electricity, gas-lighting and other urban developments followed. By 1910 the shape and aspect of the city had been transformed.

In chapter 4 we looked further at the changes underlying Bangkok's transformation after about 1890. It is notable that until the end of the 19th century there was no effective administrative control of the Capital, but rather a series of haphazard and overlapping authorities. However, in 1892 the Ministry of the Capital was established and this Ministry

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<sup>2</sup>Tej Bunnag, *The Provincial Administration of Siam, 1892-1915*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1977, pp. 61-63.

undertook a number of significant activities. The archives of the Ministry of the Capital show the work of the Ministry until it was disbanded in 1922.

The effects of the administration under the Ministry of the Capital on the growth of Bangkok between 1892 and 1922 were several. When the Ministry of the Capital was established, it was necessary to decide which districts should be included within the new jurisdiction especially the sanitary areas which covered the thickly populated parts of the city. In 1897/98, the first sanitary law was made to apply only to the area of the walled city. In 1922, the law was extended to PadungKrungkasem canal. Within this territory the Ministry of the Capital assumed responsibility for all arrangements affecting public health, urban construction, problems caused by the construction of roads, and other matters. The chief tasks included the removal and disposal of rubbish drainage, construction and cleaning of canals, construction and cleaning of public streets, supply of water, lighting of streets, maintenance and control of public markets, maintenance of hospitals, maintenance and control of slaughterhouses, enforcement of rules for the sanitary condition of private residences, the execution of laws relating to public health, and the detection and suppression of crime. The Ministry controlled the police, supervised the pawnshops, and issued licenses for a number of regulated activities. In short, the Ministry had a wide range of responsibilities, and the Ministry's role was clearly part of an attempt by the Siamese authorities to give Bangkok an administrative structure in keeping with a modern capital city.

Land settlement and population growth, coupled with political changes which saw Bangkok develop as a modern capital with centralised power, and revenue collection, encouraged the development of a new administrative structure. This Ministry ensured that Bangkok would be administered as part of state (royal) interests, and may thus be seen as part of a process of centralization initiated by Prince Damrong in the 1890s.

The discussion in chapter 4 included an analysis of Bangkok's population growth, structure, and settlement. We argued that the population was less than often suggested, but that by 1910 there was a clear development of new suburbs adjacent to the older river areas.

Chapter 3 and chapter 4 showed that after the impressive growth of Bangkok between 1890 and 1920 there was a slowing down. The interwar period, marked by the political convulsion of 1933, stagnation and lower prices in the world market, and the great depression of the 1930s, brought an end to the vigorous growth. This did not lessen Bangkok's primacy though, and the revolution of 1932 strengthened Bangkok's importance in some respects.

Chapter 5 discusses the revival of Bangkok's growth in the post-war years and the economic transformation of the 1950s and the 1960s. These post-war years were critical in the transformation of Bangkok from the international port city of earlier times to the manufacturing and commercial centre it became subsequently. From looking outwards towards the international economy as had been the case since the mid 19th century, Bangkok now increasingly became the economic hub of an industrializing economy. Since an overwhelmingly proportion of manufacturing activity took place in Bangkok, the capital's economic primacy was entrenched. The period saw the rapid industrialization of Bangkok and an influx of immigrants from an increasingly populous and accessible countryside. From this base Bangkok's growth continued, and by the 1980s had become a flourishing modern city and the capital of one of the new Asian "tigers".

Important factors in the post-war period included major demographic change. Population growth in the country was rapid, leading to an influx of immigrants into Bangkok. Population growth did not slow significantly until the 1970s. At the same time, political change brought an end to the traditional flow of Chinese immigrants into Bangkok. The flow had lessened in the 1930s, dried up during the war period, and after a brief post-war revival, came to a virtual halt after 1949.

Other important changes included U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asia, including a considerable military presence in Thailand. We note, too, the beginnings of a major tourist trade in this period, with a considerable impact on the development of Bangkok.

Chapter 5 also analysed the physical spread of the metropolitan area and the emergence of a "metropolis". Suburbs grew rapidly after 1960, new roads were constructed, and canals were filled to make way for roads. The new port at Klong Toey,

opened in the 1950s, was also significant in shifting the commercial centre of gravity southwards. We note that the periods of Thailand's strong man of the period, general Sarit, were often Bangkok-oriented in terms of government investment, the development of infrastructure, and the concentration of services and facilities.

Chapter 6 attempts to account for the transformation of Bangkok from a port-city dominated by migrants to a manufacturing centre based on cheap labour. The argument rests mainly on demographic change which transformed the economy from one where indigenous labour was relatively expensive to one where it was relative cheap.

After 1950, Thailand's continued fast population growth put pressure on rural incomes, and led to the fragmentation of farms and growing tenancy and landlessness. Growing disparity between rural and urban incomes pushed people towards Bangkok. With the rapid overall population growth, a pool of "cheap" rural labour developed which could supply the industrial and service sectors in Bangkok, on which growth further depended. Wages in Bangkok grew relative to those in the provinces, and it is a major finding of this thesis that the relations between rural and Bangkok unskilled earnings, favourable to the former in the pre-war period, became increasingly in Bangkok's favour after around 1950.

Chapter 7 covers the physical changes which accompanied the economic transformation of Bangkok in the post-war period. A major theme is the expansion of the national highway system which linked Bangkok to the provinces. This system was centred on Bangkok, encouraged the economic development of rural regions and hence the supply of products to the capital, and encouraged a flow of migrants to Bangkok.

Notably the period saw no diminishing in Bangkok's primacy. We suggest a number of reasons for this. The export orientation of many of Thailand's cheap-labour products gave a locational advantage to the leading port. Also, the commercial infrastructure of banks, insurance houses, and so on, encouraged concentration in the capital. We should add that Bangkok remained the major provider of a host of services such as education. Thus the existing facilities of Bangkok, a legacy of the earlier port-city period, remained to ensure Bangkok's predominance as a manufacturing and commercial centre in the changed post-war circumstances.

There was also a social and cultural dimension to Bangkok's primacy. The spread of television and the cinema, the Bangkok-centred school curricula, and many other elements, enhanced the status of Bangkok, of the "Bangkok language", and cemented the cultural superiority of the capital. Ambitious country youngsters rarely saw their futures within the confines of their local areas, but rather looked to the opportunities presented by Bangkok.

From around 1980 Bangkok's role changed yet again, as a major regional capital of a "tiger" economy. By this time the capital was experiencing many problems associated with environmental degradation, large slum communities, traffic congestion, and so on. Such problems have been accompanied by a growing realisation that Thai economy has been centralised in Bangkok, and active steps should be taken to spread development and the benefits of growth to regional centres.