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THE STUDY OF INDOCHINA AND BURAPHA UNIVERSITY

By Craig J. Reynolds

In a recent visit to Burapha University (December 1997 - January 1998) I was located in the Indochina Studies Centre in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. This association with the Centre gave me an opportunity to observe the development of the study of Indochina at Burapha University and to speak with the academics who have been involved in its establishment, especially the Center's Chairman, Associate Professor Saroot Skunrat. There are many positive signs, such as instruction in Khmer language already underlay and the possibility of language teaching on an exchange basis between Vietnam and Thailand, that augur well for the development of the Center

In this brief paper I want to highlight what I think are the advantages to Burapha of developing an Indochina Studies Center. I also want to discuss the history of Thailand and Indochina, particularly Vietnam, from a comparative perspective. Although most of my published work concerns the history of Thailand, I teach the history of Vietnam and Cambodia, and I have supervised doctoral research on both countries. The main purpose of the discussion in this paper is to suggest how the study

of Indochina can be incorporated into teaching and research at Burapha.

The study of Thailand's neighbors is not well-developed in the university sector. Only recently has there been much attention in Thai universities to the study of other Southeast Asian languages, such as Vietnamese and Cambodian. Now that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has invited Vietnam to be one of its members, we can see that a regional grouping of Southeast Asian countries, which includes *all* the countries of the region, is beginning to take shape. Cambodia, of course, is not yet a member of ASEAN.

It is, therefore, important that Thai universities begin to take the study of Indochinese countries seriously, including the study of languages. This is not difficult with respect to Laos, because Lao is in the Tai family of languages, but the task is rather difficult with respect to Cambodian and Vietnamese.

GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING

It seems to me very appropriate that Burapha University has decided to establish the Indochina

Studies Center. The geographical location of Burapha makes this point nicely. A glance at the map will show that Choburi Province, where Burapha is situated, lies along the southeast coast that stretches to the border with Cambodia and continues to the delta of the Mekong River as it empties into the South China Sea at the southern tip of Vietnam. Trading vessels have made their way along this coast for many centuries, and many Chinese merchants and traders settled along the coast, which accounts for the large Chinese population.

The main point I would make about the history of the southeast coast bordering the Gulf of Thailand is that while Choburi was firmly in the orbit of the royal center at Ayutthaya and, later, Thonburi and Bangkok, it was also involved in the wider history of commerce in this part of mainland Southeast Asia. For example, in the late seventeenth century an enterprising commercial official at the Phnom Penh court, Mac Cuu, who had been born in Guangdong province in China, established himself at the port of Ha Tien, near the town of Kampot in the southern tip of the Cambodian-Vietnamese border. There he attracted other Chinese from Canton as well as some Vietnamese and Khmers who were fleeing dynastic troubles in their own countries. Mac Cuu "built a little state that embraced a string of ports along the eastern shore of the Gulf of Siam".¹ This state, ruled by Mac Cuu followed by his Sino-Vietnamese son, Mac Thien-tu, flourished for nearly a hundred years until it was brought to an end by the Tayson rebels in 1777.

By the early nineteenth century the "string of ports" along the Gulf included Bang Plaso, Bang Pakong, Bang Lamung, Rayong, Chanthaburi, Thung Yai (Trad), Kampong Som and Kampot in Cambodia, Ha Tien, and

gamboge, cardamom, ivory, hides, horns, dried deer's skin, and salted fish for the Chinese market. John Crawford, an English envoy to the Siamese and Cochinese courts, estimated that there were forty to fifty Siamese junks involved in this trade.

Apart from the economic importance of the coast from Choburi east to Cambodia and Vietnam, there was a strategic importance. In her very readable and useful pamphlet on Choburi's history, Adjarn Phradit Mahakhan points out that the coast east of Thonburi-Bangkok was a vital staging area in Thaksin's struggle for the throne, and this struggle involved the little state at Ha Tien at the end of the eighteenth century.³ At first it appeared that Chao Taksin would be able to form an alliance with Mac Thien-tu, but the latter was intent on placing his own candidate on the Cambodian throne and the alliance collapsed. Thien-tu sent a naval expedition to attack Chanthaburi and Trad, a major base of Thonburi's seaborne commerce, but he was defeated by Taksin.⁴

The Thai monarchy at the end of the nineteenth century was forced again to recognize the strategic significance of the Thailand-Cambodia-Vietnam coastline. In the reign of King Mongkut (1851-1868) and especially in the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910) Koh Sichang off the Choburi coast was developed for the relaxation and convalescence of members of the royal family. Koh Sichang had been a port of call for trading vessel, and King Chulalongkorn constructed several buildings and facilities (reservoirs and gardens) to accommodate his growing family. Two of King Chulalongkorn's sons, Prince Atsadang and the future King Vajiravudh, recovered from illnesses on Koh Sichang, and Prince Juthathut was born on the island in 1892.⁵ In the wake of the French crisis of 1893 and the blockade of the Bangkok port, however, Koh Sichang ceased to be a safe haven for the king and close members of his family. His visits to the island were suspended for about six years.⁶ Subsequently, in the reign of King Vajiravudh, a naval base was built at Satthahip to strengthen the defense of the kingdom.⁷

Clearly, the colonization of Cambodia and Vietnam by the French constituted a threat to the Bangkok court. Thus the Choburi coast became a pressure point in Thailand's struggle with the European powers to remain uncolonized. To summarize, it is clear that Burapha University is located in a part of Thailand that for a long time has had economic and strategic significance precisely because it shares the coastline along the Gulf of Thailand with Cambodia and Vietnam.



Rang Gia, Ca Mau (Long-Xuyen) and Saigon in Vietnam. Siamese, Cambodian, Cochinese, Chinese, and Western merchants traded in these ports.² Siamese junks on the way to China called in at the ports to trade in

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

There are numerous approaches available for the cooperative study of Thailand and Indochina based on the environment, for example, or ethnicity, culture, political systems, or the economy. Because of Burapha University's existing strengths in ecology and the environment it might be a good idea to design a curriculum and research projects in these fields. But my own disciplinary training is in history, and as my contact with Burapha University has been through the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, I have decided to focus my discussion on a comparative historical framework. I will concentrate on Vietnam, because the links between Burapha and Vietnamese educational institutions are most likely to develop more quickly in this direction.

When I am lecturing on Vietnam I tend to emphasize the big differences in the historical development of Thailand and Vietnam. The Vietnamese state is older, and it was subjected in the first thousand years of its existence to sustained cultural and political influence from China. It became an autonomous state in the tenth century, at a time when Mon and Khmer civilization prevailed in the mid and lower Chaophraya River basin⁶. At that time, before the Vietnamese population had spread south to occupy what is now the Indochinese Peninsula, the heartland of Vietnam was in the north, in the Red River Delta. There had been relatively little contact with Indic civilization, as contrasted with the Mon, Khmer, and, later, Thai populations in central and south-central Thailand.

The character of the state in each country was different. In Vietnam the state was conceived similarly to the Chinese state. Vietnamese rulers placed great importance on regular dynastic succession. Also, a proper state was supposed to have definite boundaries. By contrast, the succession in the early Tai states was fluid, often contested, and leadership was based on the personal prowess and reputation of the ruler. States did not have fixed boundaries. Instead, the power of the ruler diminished markedly outside the royal base. The territorial extent of the state was not clearly delimited. Only in the late nineteenth century did the Thai state develop a clear sense of its territorial self.

The other great difference between the Thai and Vietnamese states was in religion. The early Tai states soon became Buddhist as they moved southward through the river valleys of the Chaophraya basin, but as the Buddhist religion offered little in the way of ceremony for statecraft, the early Tai rulers (including Lao rulers) adopted Brahmanic ceremonies.

In Vietnam Buddhism was important in very early centuries, when it captured the imagination of ordinary people much as it did in Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. Buddhism was easily assimilated to local animism—the worship of trees and aquatic spirits. Later, during the T'ang dynasty from the seventh to the tenth centuries when Buddhism was strong in China, Mahayana Buddhism was popular in Vietnam, and it was popular again during the reigns of the first independent Ly rulers in the tenth and early eleventh centuries. But from the early fifteenth century, when the Ming ruler occupied Vietnam, Buddhism declined. In its place there emerged a Neo-Confucian orthodoxy⁷.

From that time onward Confucianism became significant in the thinking and education of the Vietnamese ruling elite. Confucianism was a philosophy



of social organization and social behavior. Because there was a close relationship between morality, politics, and science, Confucianism provided guidance for both rulers and ruled. To learn how to read was the first step in learning how to govern.

I stress that this picture of Vietnamese religion applies to the north only. In the south, not yet occupied by Vietnamese people at that time, the religious picture was more similar to the rest of Indic Southeast Asia. Along the coast of southern Vietnam the Cham people lived until their demise in the fifteenth century. Some of their temples to Mahayanist and Brahmanic gods survive today. The southward push of the Vietnamese people is one of the big themes in Vietnamese history, to which I will return later.

Another point to make in this general contrast of the histories of the two countries is the role China played. As we can see in the Chinese governing of Vietnam as a province for a thousand years and in the invasion of the

fifteenth century, China from time to time intervened directly in the affairs of the Vietnamese court. We



cannot forget that China, and the tribute system that cemented relations with Southeast Asian states, played a big part in the history of Thailand. The date of the first Thai-language inscription of 1292 A.D. is also the date of a mission sent from the Sukhothai ruler to the Chinese ruler. At no time, however, did China send a military expedition as far as Sukhothai. This distinctive relationship that Vietnam had with China created a particular dilemma in the thinking of the Vietnamese elite who felt both "resistance to" and "dependency on" Chinese civilization.¹⁰ The complexities of this thinking still affect the way Vietnam views its large neighbor to the north.

Finally, when we come to modern period there are very big contrasts in the history of colonialism and nationalism. Vietnam became a colony of France, and the Vietnamese court lost its autonomy in the 1880s. The loss of Vietnamese sovereignty ignited a resistance movement which evolved into the nationalist and independence movement that culminated in August Revolution of 1945. Vietnamese history has been much more radical and violent than Thailand's modern history. I want now to give two examples of these processes in a comparative framework for the modern period.

The Peasantry In Vietnamese history and from time to time in Thai history the state expanded by relying on

the peasantry to colonize new lands. In Thai history the most well-known example of this reliance is the agricultural expansion that took place in the Rangsit district north of Bangkok. Generally speaking, the massive agricultural expansion that took place in reign of King Chulalongkorn has not abated since his reign. The consolidation of central control has continued to rely on moving minority peoples to frontier areas, which is one of the causes of deforestation in Thailand and the ever-present threat to forest reserves. Nevertheless, when compared to the situation in Vietnam, agricultural expansion in Thailand has not involved large-scale migrations or population movements.¹¹

As I have pointed out above, the heartland of the Vietnamese state was for many centuries in the north, in the Red River valley. The southward expansion of the state over several centuries until the late eighteenth century is a major theme in Vietnamese history. This southward expansion even has a special name, *nam tien*, or drive to the south. The Vietnamese historian Le Thanh Khoi has called the "drive to the south" the central thread of the history of the Viet people.¹²

As late as the early nineteenth century the Vietnamese kings were conquering and pacifying the Mekong Delta where Saigon is located. They did this by digging canals and founding military settlements (*don dien*). When the settlers numbered fifty they could apply for a plot of land that was subject to tax for only seven years. In exchange, the settlers were obliged to perform military service.¹³ This process of colonizing the Mekong Delta in the early nineteenth century was simply the end of a long process of state expansion which had begun almost from the moment of Vietnamese autonomous rule in the tenth century A.D. The process had extinguished the Cham state in the fifteenth century and ultimately displaced the Khmer people who had settled in the Delta.

The process of southward expansion by means of agricultural-military settlements resulted in an elongated state that reached into cultural zones that had not been previously populated by Vietnamese. The differences between the culture and social organization of southern and northern peoples were made deeper by French colonial rule. The French ruled Vietnam in three parts: Cochinchina (the south); Annam (the center); and the Tonking (the north). These administrative units further divided the peoples of Vietnam. The war of independence fought by the Vietnamese against the French and later the Americans was also a struggle to unify the different parts of Vietnam that had first been created by the expansion of the state and then divided by French rule.

The role of the peasantry in the expansion of the Vietnamese state may thus be usefully compared to the role of the peasantry in the Thai state. My conclusion is that there are clear differences both in the way the peasantry was used to settle frontier lands and also in the consequences for modern history.

The Creation of New Values Another clear comparison and contrast, which shows similarities between the two countries, is in the nationalist period during the 1920s and 1930s. At first sight, it would seem the nationalist period in Vietnam and Thailand were very different, particularly because Vietnam was directly colonized and Thailand was not, and because the communist party became the leader of the nationalist movement in



Vietnam. But there is one particular aspect of this history that is very similar, namely, the importance of self-reliance, self-help, and the admiration of people in the past who had "made history".

To understand this point we can begin by looking at the work of the leading Thai nationalist writer, Luang Wichit Wathakan (1898-1962). One of Luang Wichit's major themes in the 1920s was the biographies of famous figures who demonstrated the positive relationship between individuals and national progress. Luang Wichit's book, *Mahaburut* (1928), described the lives of important statesmen and military leaders. The examples of such figures came from other societies. Luang Wichit discussed Napoleon, Bismarck, Disraeli, Gladstone, Okubo Toshimichi of Japan, and Mussolini in terms of the essential qualities that made them "great" and how these qualities could be developed.¹⁴

An identical process was underway in Vietnam to identify the essential qualities of people who had "made history" and encourage the development of those

qualities in the nationalist struggle. In Vietnam the historical figures of interest included the explorer Columbus and the American President Abraham Lincoln. Of particular value in the debate in Vietnam were "those individuals who had demonstrated great courage against seemingly insurmountable odds".¹⁵ The Vietnamese authors who wrote about these historical figures were concerned to show how triumphed in their circumstances because of their personal character and resourcefulness.

The Self-Strength Literary Movement that became popular in Vietnam in the early 1930s was another example of a similarity between Luang Wichit's writings and Vietnamese literature. The members of the Self-Strength Literary Movement pledged to promote a philosophy of popularism and agreed to introduce Western scientific concepts into their writings.¹⁶ They wanted to instill new values in Vietnamese youth that would be useful in dislodging the French from Vietnam. These same values that were promoted by Luang Wichit, of course, were aimed at strengthening Thai people at a popular level so they would remain independent of colonial rule.

In sum, the social values that interested Vietnamese nationalist thinkers were the very same social values that interested the Thai nationalist intellectual, Luang Wichit Wathakan. I suggest that these similarities could be explored further in a research project.



