

“Lanna – The Impact and Inheritance of a Semi-Colony Regime” by Emeritus Prof. Dr. Tanet Charoenmuang  
for LANNA ANNUAL ANNEX exhibition by Sudaporn Teja  
at Gallery VER Project Room

Despite being surrounded on all sides by the ocean, The Thai state - formerly known as Siam - was never considered to be on the same common shipping lanes as its neighbors India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Cambodia, and Vietnam. The result of this was when the colonizing nations from the West sent their ships over to trade and conquer, taking colonies along the shipping lanes from the West and heading Eastwards from India to China, Siam was never a primary target.

When King Rama IV finally relented to a trade agreement and opened Siam's borders to 14 Western countries, beginning with England in 1855 and France and America the year after, the agreement was highly skewed against Thailand's favor. But the agreement was signed out of fear that Thailand would become colonized, ultimately losing its independence. Thailand became a semi-colony state, a position that satisfied the Western powers as every other surrounding nation had been colonized. While Siam would maintain its own government, every neighboring country was being overrun, their leaders deposed and powerless. Gone are the ruling systems of old, as the foreigners rose fully into power.

This semi-colony system profoundly affected Thai society in 4 ways: 1.) The ruling class would consolidate their power, transitioning into an absolute monarchy. 2.) The ruling class would also seek to annex what surrounding territory they could, including Lanna and Patani (they also attempted to conquer Chiang Tung twice, but failed). 3.) A highly centralized state system was established, dictating all aspects of society including governance, economy, culture, and natural resources. 4.) As the Western nations held the economic advantage while not directly exerting control, notions of struggling for independence or nationalistic ideals never arose. This meant Thailand lacked the spirit of nationalism or the political experience of resisting oppression from both foreign power and domestic rulers. It would take many years for a strong sense of citizenship to properly manifest.

Amidst the colonial regime of their neighbors, the rulers of Siam hastened to strengthen their own positions, limiting the role of the civilian sector and establishing a state that is monolithic in every respect. This is especially true of the centralized bureaucratic system, the management of religious figures, and even education. As such, the process of ‘Siamification’ would take place under the reigns of Kings Rama V and VI, which began with state building, and later nation building, to create a sense of unity based on obeisance to the monarchy.

An important example for the case of Lanna include: the union between the King of Chiang Mai's youngest daughter (Princess Dara Rasmi, aged 13) and the King of Siam in the year 1886, which many regarded as a political marriage. The systematic dismantling of the authority and role of Lanna's ruler would ultimately result in the dissolution of Lanna as a state in the year 1899; the establishing laws with the intent of controlling the monkhood in 1902, gradually diminishing Lanna's independent system and bringing them under the authority of Siam's monkhood, and resolving the dispute between Khruba Siwichai and the Siamese temples in 1936; learning to read or write the Lanna alphabet was forbidden among the temple

schools, while the state opened a swathe of new elementary schools which taught the Siamese language specifically beginning in 1911, leaving only a single book for those wishing to study Lanna history named ‘The Legend of Singhavati’, which was written in 1897 by a Siamese aristocrat and intellectual.

The act of sending high-ranking aristocrats to rule in Lanna’s key cities, sending bright local monks to get further education in Bangkok before sending them back to rule over the local monks; The quelling of the Chiang Mai rebels (Phaya Phap) in 1887-1888 and the decisive routing of the Phrae rebels (Ngiao rebels) in 1902-1903; the erection of military bases within almost every city; the demolishing of important local governmental structures and constructing prisons in their place, which took place in Chiang Mai, Lamphun, Lampang, and Chiang Rai, especially within the vicinity of royal palaces, and constructing Western-style Siam government buildings in the city centers; everything was planned and executed with patience, so as to not evoke any sudden feelings of loss or longing, nor any thoughts of resistance, etc.

This highly centralized mode of government would continue on for over 58 years (1899-1957), until the government’s ‘highway’ economic stimulation policies and ‘Running Water-Bright Lights-Good Roads’ campaign began based on the first draft of the Economic and Social Development plan in 1961 and beyond. But due to the centralized nature of government, despite the establishment of local offices since 1933 such as the municipality office, sanitation, district congress, provincial administration, and later the district administrations, much of the decision-making, budget approval, and personnel still answered to each province’s central administration.

Even the educational system was taken over, with management and curriculum systems determined by the central authority all the way to every university. From there, while local academics were able to uncover the word ‘Lanna’ in old record tablets, and while standing up to sing in the Northern dialect was respected as a way to announce one’s identity as a ‘Northerner’ and Chiang Mai-Lanna citizen (700 years, from 1296-1996), but the clergy, schools, and local administration still can’t be handled by those local to the area (such as forcing students to speak in the central dialect in classrooms, forbidding the use of local dialects in educational institutions, banning sermons in local tongues on temples, and restricting learning materials pertaining to Lanna history, etc.). While some aspects of Lanna have been restored, it is only within a very limited scope seemingly for the sake of tourism, such as wearing traditional clothes during important ceremonies or encouraging use of local dialects during high season, far from the ‘way of life’ that has been lost.

The continued existence of Wat Intharawat (Wat Ton Kwen) is the only temple to have preserved its original 200-year-old art. Besides that, almost every temple seems new and shiny, possessing the same motifs and symbols seen in temples in the Central region; a tangible example of a centralized government that still exists today.

In conclusion, it is difficult to find youngsters and students in any Lanna city who is able to or is interested in using the ‘Northern dialect’ fluently. The phenomenon of parents no longer using their native dialects to speak to their children and instead opting to use Thai is thus one that both intrigues and greatly challenges any academic struggling to preserve Lanna culture and local governments today.