

## France and the King of Siam: An Asian King's Visits to the Republican Capital

*Robert Aldrich*

Even in the twenty-first century, royal tours excite the curiosity of monarchists (and often republicans), journalists and celebrity-watchers. That was even more the case a hundred years ago, with fewer film stars, singers and athletes posing for their fifteen minutes of celebrity. At a time when almost all European countries boasted crowned sovereigns as their heads, royals possessed a gravitas, and played a political role, that has since lessened. Paris, capital of revolution and the republic, continued to enjoy royal visits, and in the *fin-de-siècle* and Belle Époque, just about every European royal of consequence, and countless minor ones, passed through Paris. They came to see *expositions universelles*, to pay state visits aimed at advancing geopolitical objectives, and for their personal entertainment.

Asian royals were less common figures in Paris, however, than their European counterparts. Asia, after all, was distant, and its suzerains less apt to travel; Chinese emperors almost never left their “forbidden city,” and Hindu maharajahs would lose caste status if they crossed the ocean without carrying along pure food and water.<sup>1</sup> This article discusses the visits to Paris of the first East Asian or Southeast Asian sovereign to tour Europe, King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) of Siam, in 1897 and 1907.<sup>2</sup> Such an Oriental ruler represented an exotic sight, greeted with great wonder, bemusement, a certain political suspicion and occasional hostility because of French expansionist designs in Southeast Asia. His visits blend elements of high politics and

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<sup>1</sup> Middle Eastern sovereigns were more likely to visit Europe: the Ottoman Sultan Abdülaziz, for instance, undertook a tour in 1867; shahs of Persia visited in 1873 and 1900. Former rulers were occasionally freer to travel than reigning ones; the deposed Sikh prince, Maharajah Duleep Singh, died in Paris in 1893 after having lived much of his life in Britain subsequent to his forced abdication; Ahmad Shah Qajar, another shah of Persia, lived in Neuilly-sur-Seine after being deposed in 1925.

<sup>2</sup> The name of Siam was changed officially to Thailand after the revolution of 1932; I have used Siam here except for references to contemporary perspectives.

the strategy of personal diplomacy, the cult of celebrity attached to royals and drummed up by the press, and busy sight-seeing. They show the way nations used state visits to show themselves off to each other to best advantage, but also to maneuver for substantial benefits. Much could hang in the balance: good or bad impressions, amicable or strained relations, *entente* or belligerency. Chulalongkorn's 1897 visit was particularly delicate, taking place shortly after a military skirmish between the French and the Siamese, and at a time when some in the *parti colonial* hoped to make Siam into a French colony. The king's mission was to ensure that did not happen.

*France, Siam and the Struggle for Influence in Southeast Asia*

Diplomatic contacts between France and Siam had begun when Louis XIV sent an embassy to Siam and received a return visit from a Siamese delegation in the 1680s, though subsequently relations remained very limited until renewed by a diplomatic mission to the Siamese court in 1856.<sup>3</sup> In 1861, King Rama IV dispatched an emissary to Napoleon III at a tense moment, as France had recently occupied Cochinchina and was preparing to establish a protectorate over Cambodia as part of Napoleon III's efforts at colonial expansion. Jean-Léon Gérôme painted the audience at Fontainebleau at which the Siamese on hands and knees approached the thrones of the French emperor and empress, just as they would have done in Rama IV's court; the picture conveys Asian protocol brought to Europe, but also proclaims the sense of superiority of the French.<sup>4</sup>

Such exchanges of delegations were matters of delicate protocol, but they formed a vital aspect of *realpolitik* and the quest for the profits to be derived from diplomatic and commercial relations. Napoleon III's initiatives introduced a French presence to Southeast Asia, where the Dutch in the East Indies, the British in coastal Burma and island outposts such as Penang and Singapore, and the Spanish in the Philippines had heretofore been the main colonial players. A quarter-century after the Siamese emissaries' reception at Fontainebleau, European rivalries in Southeast Asia would become far more intense.

With the British conquest of Upper Burma in 1885 (completing the takeover of the country begun in the 1820s), and successful French expansion into Tonkin at the same time (from positions in Cochinchina and Annam), Siam found itself in an unenviable position situated between the two colonial powers. The efforts of the king and government to maintain the independence of the country encompassed several strategies. Reform of the administration and the army cast Siam as a polity undertaking modernization along European lines in a way similar to Japan, which had successfully staved off colonial conquest, and strengthened Siam's position as a legitimate sovereign state. The monarch and his ministers meanwhile tried to play off the British and the French, but very intelligently also brought in advisers from other countries: one of King Chulalongkorn's chief ministers and foreign policy counselors during the 1890s was a Belgian, Gustave Rolin-Jacquemyns, and the admiral who

<sup>3</sup> Dirk van der Cruyssen, *Siam and the West 1500-1700* (Chiang Mai, 2002), which concentrates on Franco-Siamese relations; Derick Garnier, *Ayutthaya: Venice of the East* (Bangkok, 2004), Ch. 8; and Michael Smithies, *Mission Impossible: The Second French Embassy to Siam 1687* (Chiang Mai, 2002). Smithies has also edited contemporary accounts of embassies to Bangkok and Paris: Chevalier de Chaumont and Abbé de Choisy, *Aspects of the Embassy to Siam, 1685* (Bangkok, 1997), and *The Diary of Kosa Pan, Thai Ambassador to France, June-July 1686* (Chiang Mai, 2002). See also the catalogue of an exhibition at the Musée de l'Orangerie, *Phra Narai, roi de Siam et Louis XIV* (Paris, 1986).

<sup>4</sup> Xavier Salmon, ed., *Le Siam à Fontainebleau: L'Ambassade du 27 juin 1861* (Paris, 2011). See also "Les Siamois à Paris," in *Le Paris Asie*, Pascal Blanchard and Éric Deroo (Paris, 2004), 24-25.

became commander-in-chief of the Siamese navy was a Dane, Andreas du Plessis de Richelieu.<sup>5</sup> (Despite the Francophone background of the one, and the distant French ancestry of the other, the French considered neither to be favorable to their interests.) In diplomatic relations, Bangkok also paid particular attention to Germany and Russia. King Chulalongkorn was interested in Germany's growing power in Europe and the wider world, as well as its combination of strong-armed government and economic development, and German officials reciprocated, eager to secure some German share in the power plays of Southeast Asia. A visit by the Russian tsarevitch, the future Nicholas II, to Bangkok in 1890 had helped establish a personal link between the Siamese king and the Russian emperor, and Russia, too, perceived benefits in gaining leverage in Southeast Asia.

Geopolitical and commercial advantage were thus up for grabs, with Siam able to concede benefits to the Europeans, but also potentially the victim of their rivalries, its territory liable to be divided and its independence compromised or extinguished. Indeed, in order to keep Siam independent Chulalongkorn would ultimately be forced to cede considerable territory to France in the east and to Britain in the south. Only at such a price could his throne be preserved and the territorial integrity of the remainder of his realm safeguarded. In the 1890s and for some years to come, the king would maneuver, very carefully, between Britain and France, Germany and Russia; historians accord the king considerable credit for achieving his goals. Of the various European powers, France arguably represented the greatest dangers to the Siamese. Its republican form of government and revolutionary heritage could hardly inspire empathy among the Siamese rulers, *Indochine Française* provided a base for the potential further expansion demanded by some members of the colonial lobby in Paris, and the porous borders between Siam and Cambodia gave rise to incidents that might precipitate war.

### *King Chulalongkorn*

Few in France possessed profound knowledge about Siam and its culture, though opportunities to make a passing acquaintance with the kingdom had presented themselves.<sup>6</sup> Bangkok maintained diplomatic representation in Paris. Siam had gone on show in the French capital at the *expositions universelles* that punctuated the life of the city. In 1878, for instance, the Siamese mounted a pavilion inspired by the Grand Palace in Bangkok and filled it with musical instruments, furniture, household utensils, rich silks and jewels borrowed from the king's own collection. Readers had learned about the marvels of Siam through the writings of explorers such as Henri Mouhot and the missionary Jean-Baptiste Pallegoix.<sup>7</sup> Siam continued to figure in the French imaginary through an exhibit in the world's fair in 1889, geographical journals and

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<sup>5</sup> See Walter E.J. Tips, *Gustave Rolin-Jaequemyns and the Making of Modern Siam: The Diaries and Letters of King Chulalongkorn's General Adviser* (Bangkok, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Donald S. Lopez Jr., *From Stone to Flesh: A Short History of the Buddha* (Chicago, 2013), gives a good idea of how slowly Europeans began to comprehend Buddhism; that developing understanding owed much to French scholars.

<sup>7</sup> Clovis Lammare et al., *La Perse, le Siam et le Cambodge et l'Exposition de 1878* (Paris, 1878). See also Christiane Demeulenaere-Douyère, *Exotiques Expositions... les Exposition universelles et les cultures extra-européennes, France, 1855-1937* (Paris, 2000), 188-89. In 1900, the Siamese protested, successfully, at plans to locate their exhibition in the colonial section of the world's fair in Paris. Jean-Baptiste Pallegoix was author of *Description du royaume thaï* (Paris, 2 vols, 1854). Henri Mouhot's writing has been translated as *Travels in Siam, Cambodia, and Laos, 1858-1860*, ed. Michael Smithies, (Oxford, 1992).

travelers' accounts, and in 1897, Parisians were treated to a visit by the Siamese king himself.

King Chulalongkorn was born in 1853 and succeeded to the throne on the death in 1868 of his father Mongkut, the king made famous in the West by the fanciful accounts of Anna Lenowens, an English tutor in his court (whose experiences would later feature in the musical 'The King and I', a representation that departed even further from reality than Lenowens' memoirs).<sup>8</sup> Chulalongkorn reigned until 1910, and at the time and since has been judged one of the most important Siamese monarchs. 'Chulalongkorn the Great' won accolades for reforming the army, administration and justice system, introducing Western-style education, abolishing slavery, building new infrastructure and generally undertaking projects of modernization. He is held in particular reverence in present-day Thailand, where according to Irene Stengs he remains the "patron saint" of the Thai middle class and subject of a veritable cult.<sup>9</sup>

Siamese monarchs ruled with autocratic powers until a revolution in 1932. In the absence of a parliament, the kings (and their advisers) determined policy. For Buddhists, the kings enjoyed semi-divine status and were treated with the utmost deference, as they still are. They possessed vast wealth, displayed in their many palaces and temples. Their courts were enormous, with several thousand people living within the royal compound in Bangkok. The kings counted many wives and children: Chulalongkorn had more than 150 wives and official concubines, and fathered seventy-seven sons and daughters. From the reign of Mongkut, and especially under Chulalongkorn, according to Maurizio Peleggi, the Siamese sovereigns engaged in a process of fashioning the monarchy anew, not only modernizing the kingdom, but also modernizing the throne.<sup>10</sup> Kings dressed in Western-style uniforms, built Western-style palaces and bestowed Western-style decorations. Though maintaining ancestral traditions, and intervening in political matters in a way that was becoming uncommon for most European monarchs, they presented themselves as kings that fit the European model.<sup>11</sup> They aimed to be treated as peers by European counterparts, and to have their kingdom accorded equal status to other 'civilized' countries in the concert of nations. Foreign journeys provided occasions for recognition.

King Chulalongkorn had been the first king of Siam to travel outside the country, going to Singapore and the Malay states, Java and India, in 1871-1872, 1877 and 1890, and back to the East Indies in 1896 and 1901.<sup>12</sup> He wrote extensively on his

<sup>8</sup> Margaret Landon, *Anna and the King of Siam* (New York, 1944), popularized the story of the Englishwoman. According to Alfred Habegger, *Masked: The Life of Anna Lenowens, Schoolmistress at the Court of Siam* (Madison, Wisc., 2014), the book and the 1951 musical helped entrench an imperialistic American view of Thailand.

<sup>9</sup> Irene Stengs, *Worshipping the Great Moderniser: King Chulalongkorn, Patron Saint of the Thai Middle Classes* (Singapore, 2009), provides an authoritative study of the place of Chulalongkorn in Thai memory, commemoration and political mythology. Prince Chula Chakrabongse, in *Lord of Life: The Paternal Monarchy of Bangkok, 1782-1932* (London, 1960), notes of the king's 1897 visit to France, rather succinctly, that "he was agreeably surprised to find that he was well received both officially and spontaneously by the French people" (253).

<sup>10</sup> On the Siamese monarchy and its modernization, see Maurizio Peleggi, *Lords of Things: The Fashioning of the Siamese Monarchy's Modern Image* (Honolulu, 2002). (See also his *Thailand: The Worldly Kingdom* (Bangkok, 2007), on sites and commemorations of the Thai monarchy and nationalism.)

<sup>11</sup> There are clear parallels with the self-fashioning of Japanese emperors after the Meiji restoration. See Donald Keene, *Emperor of Japan: Meiji and His World, 1852-1912* (New York, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> See P. Lim Pui Huen, *Through the Eyes of the King: The Travels of King Chulalongkorn to Malaya* (Singapore, 2009); Kannikar Sartraproong, *A True Hero: King Chulalongkorn of Siam's Visit to*

tours, and his observations on the Javanese court, the temples of Prambanan and Borobodur, and on British and Dutch colonial society are thoughtful and entertaining. They show an interest in the wider world and reveal the king as acutely conscious of his role as the head of an independent state, especially as compared to the vassal position of the sultans and rajahs under Dutch overlordship. His overseas tours also exposed him to the great development projects being undertaken in the British and Dutch empires, some of which he adopted for his kingdom.<sup>13</sup>

In 1897 Chulalongkorn journeyed from Bangkok to the Mediterranean in his custom-built yacht. His monarchy's self-fashioning was well under way: he was an Asian king sailing under his own steam, fit to hold company with Western sovereigns (and the French president). Above all, he wanted to show that Siam was determined to remain independent despite the insatiable imperial appetites of the Europeans. With straightforward clarity, Chulalongkorn said that he wanted "First, to study how life in Europe is; second, to study how wealth and goods originate; third, to fathom their [Europeans'] strength, were they to attack us; fourth, to enjoy myself as well."<sup>14</sup> Politically, he was preoccupied by relations with France, which had reached a nadir in the 1890s, and he hoped through contacts with the British queen-empress, the German kaiser and the Russian tsar to gain traction against the French. The king pertinently and poignantly summed up his hopes: "My visit could be a chance for our country's survival."<sup>15</sup>

#### *Colonialism, Indochina and Siam*

That comment echoed a remark by Chulalongkorn's father, Mongkut, in a letter to his ambassador to Paris in 1864: "Since Siam is being harassed by the French on one side, with the British colony on the other ... it is for us to decide what we are going to do; whether to swim up river to make friends with [a] crocodile or to swim out to sea and hang on to the whale."<sup>16</sup> Expressing doubt that Siam could arm itself well enough to beat a foe in battle, he added: "The only weapons that will be of real use to us in the future will be our mouths and our hearts constituted so as to be full of sense and wisdom for the better protection of ourselves."<sup>17</sup> Chulalongkorn, in his appearances on the European stage, provided that mouth and heart.

By the mid-1890s, Siam remained the only substantial area of Southeast Asia not controlled by Europeans, and the French had combined colonial proximity, consternation at Britain's predominant share in Siam's external trade, and expansionist ambition to essay their chances of exercising greater sway over the

*Singapore and Java in 1871* (Bangkok, 2008); Imtip Pattajoti Suharto, *Journeys to Java by a Siamese King* (Jakarta, 2001); and, *King Chulalongkorn's Journey to India, 1872* (Bangkok, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> King Chulalongkorn, *Itinéraire d'un voyage à Java en 1896*, ed. Chantip Kesavadhana (Paris, 1993). Charnvit Kasetsiri, in his introduction to P. Lim Pui Huen, *Through the Eyes of the King*, argues that the first two Asian trips were more important than the later European ones for Chulalongkorn's modernization projects, which were based on British and Dutch colonial models (xi).

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Peleggi, *Lords of Things*, 31.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Pornsan Watanangura, "Europe, King Chulalongkorn and the Kingdom of Siam," in *King Chulalongkorn's Visit to Europe: Reflections on Significance and Impacts*, Charit Tingsabadh, ed. (Bangkok, 2000), 29. See also Pornsan Watanangura, ed., *The Visit of King Chulalongkorn to Europe in 1907: Reflecting on Siamese History* (Bangkok, 2008). These volumes contain chapters on the king's visits to Germany and Italy, but not on France; other chapters provide overviews of economic, political and legal changes in Siam under Chulalongkorn.

<sup>16</sup> The "river" was the Mekong, where conflicts on the Thai-Cambodian border were most apt to occur, and the "ocean" is a probable reference to the power of the British fleet.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Kittisak Prokati, 'King Rama V and Constitutionalism in Thailand', in Watanangura, *The Visit of King Chulalongkorn to Europe in 1907*, 116.

kingdom.<sup>18</sup> Since the 1860s, the French had been threatening advances on Siamese lands, especially the largely Khmer eastern provinces of Battambang, Siem Reap and Sisophon, but they did not hesitate to make advances as well on the Siamese capital. In the near background of Chulalongkorn's visit stood a classic example of gunboat diplomacy, an attack on Siamese territory by the French.

In 1893, the French sent ships up the Chao Phraya River, intent on strong-armed negotiations with the Siamese to secure various advantages and perhaps also territory. However, the Siamese denied them permission to move past Paknam. French Rear-Admiral Edgar Humann ignored that refusal (contravening instructions from Paris), and pushed onwards, sinking a Siamese gunboat and killing twelve Siamese. The Siamese returned fire, with three Frenchmen killed. The French then quickly moved in a larger warship, mounted a blockade of Bangkok and trained guns on the royal palace, threatening to bombard the city. The Siamese had no choice but to agree to a treaty with the French, signed on 3 October 1893. The Siamese renounced any claims to the left bank of the Mekong River, and largely withdrew their forces from the region. French nationals and subjects were allowed to travel freely and reside in Siamese territory, and France gained extraterritorial rights over them.<sup>19</sup> However, conflict continued to fester, and memories of the skirmish, with blame cast fully upon the Siamese by the French, would resurface during Chulalongkorn's European tour.

Bellicose French sentiments can be clearly appreciated in letters written by Raphaël Réau, a young French interpreter and later consul in Bangkok from 1894 to 1900. He marveled at the grandeur of the Siamese court, describing the processions, festivals and royal audiences: "Elephants, pagodas, treasures... I am stupefied. It is really astounding," he enthused, adding that "Bangkok is perhaps the most interesting city in the world with the splendors of a despotic monarchy."<sup>20</sup> Réau's brief, however, was international politics, not tourism. He damned the Siamese government for autocracy, corruption and exploitation: there is "no justice, only abuses, abuses.... Here the strong crush the weaker, and they have no redress." He was firmly convinced that France was missing a chance to turn Siam into a colony, writing in 1895: "It would be the easiest thing in the world for the French government to take Siam without losing a drop of blood or a *sou*." Réau felt that the British were inexorably making advances to which France was not riposting: "The English, in Battambang, in the Malay Peninsula and even here [in Bangkok] slowly hatch their plots, and we will perhaps still let ourselves be duped." The Siamese seemed either sympathetic to or incapable of resisting the "insolent expansion of English influence." Réau fretted

<sup>18</sup> This article does not claim to cover in depth the complex history of Franco-Siamese relations during this period, which are the subject of two excellent monographs: Patrick Tuck, *The French Wolf and the Siamese Lamb: The French Threat to Siamese Independence, 1858-1907* (Bangkok, 1995), and Nigel J. Brailey, *Imperial Amnesia: Britain, France and 'The Question of Siam'* (Dordrecht, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> Walter E.J. Tips, *Siam's Struggle for Survival: The Gunboat Incident at Paknam and the Franco-Siamese Treaty of October 1893* (Bangkok, 1996). Treaties between the two countries are reproduced in Pensri Suvanij Duke, ed., *Les Relations entre la France et la Thaïlande (Siam) au XIXe siècle, d'après les archives des Affaires étrangères* (Bangkok, 1962).

<sup>20</sup> Philippe Marchat, *Jeune diplomate au Siam, 1894-1900: Lettres de mon grand-père Raphaël Réau* (Paris, 2013), quotations from 43, 56, 52-53, 64, 67, 164 and 95. Born on the Ile d'Oléron in 1872, Réau received a law degree from the Sorbonne and a diploma in Chinese from "Langues O," and had his first posting to Bangkok in 1894. He later served in Siam, Hong Kong and China, where he became consul-general in Shanghai in 1921. In 1928, he was named French minister in Siam, but died from illness soon after taking up the post. For another French perspective from the time – one that takes little note of politics, but great pleasure in Siamese life – see Lucien Fournereau, *Bangkok, 1892*, trans. Walter E.J. Tips (Bangkok, 1998).

about rival influences in Siam and the activities of Rolin-Jacquemyns and Admiral du Plessis de Richelieu. He lambasted the Siamese treatment of the resident Cambodians, Laotians and Vietnamese in Chulalongkorn's kingdom that France now claimed as its subjects after having established protectorates over Cambodia in the 1860s, Annam and Tonkin in the 1880s, and Laos in the early 1890s. Réau proposed to register as many Indochinese as possible at the French legation so that the French could officially remonstrate about their arrests, harassment or perceived ill treatment. In effect, Réau hoped to instigate a *casus belli* allowing France to invade Siam. In 1897, Réau raged when the Siamese authorities took into custody several Cambodians: "The King of Siam must now be in Paris where you are going to give a splendid and stupid reception to someone who refuses to return our Cambodians." Only French colonialists' preoccupation with Madagascar, which France annexed in early 1897, diverted attention and prevented action in Siam. If France would only act, Réau pleaded, Siam would become the finest colony in the empire. Such, of course, did not prove to be case, though Réau continued to champion French interests against the "filthy English" and bemoan the *politique politicienne* and passivity of leaders in Paris that denied Siam to France.

#### *Chulalongkorn in Paris, 1897*

This was the background to Chulalongkorn's *fin-de-siècle* tour. In Europe, the king visited Russia, Italy, Austria-Hungary, Britain, Germany and France, among other countries,<sup>21</sup> everywhere meeting fellow sovereigns as part of what he called "the advance of royal friendships."<sup>22</sup> The strategy depended on the king's ability to form cordial relationships with the European monarchs; that itself depended on his being able to show himself a strong, modern, competent, European-style leader. In courting alliances with each other, the European royals, of course, had an advantage over Asians. They shared many aspects of a common culture, and a long history of frequenting each other's palaces. They were also related by ties of blood and marriage, forming (at least in the 1890s) an affable family circle. Siam's monarchs were unknowns, their religion and traditions distantly foreign; racial views meant familial connections between Siamese and European royalty were unthinkable. The personal contacts and influence that Chulalongkorn might secure thereby became even more crucial to his position as a monarch equal to the Europeans,<sup>23</sup> and for Siam to ward off interventions by European countries.

France posed a particular challenge, not only because of the Franco-Siamese tensions but because France did not have a king with whom Chulalongkorn might establish peer relations. The very principles of French republicanism hardly accorded with Siamese notions of statecraft. That many republicans (though also monarchists) ardently promoted French colonial expansion, and that colonialism had become one of the key policies of the *fin-de-siècle* republic, hardly helped matters.

In traveling around Europe, Chulalongkorn had various chances to buttress his status with sympathetic European powers. He received an especially warm reception in Russia, where royalism and autocracy did not differ so greatly from the systems at home. The companionable relationship between Nicholas II and Chulalongkorn had

<sup>21</sup> Chulalongkorn was in Europe from 7 April until 16 December. He visited Italy, Switzerland, Austria-Hungary, Russia, Sweden, Denmark, Britain, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Spain and Portugal, meeting kings and prime ministers, as well as the retired German chancellor Bismarck and the pope.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Stengs, *Worshipping the Great Moderniser*, 61.

<sup>23</sup> Peleggi, *Lords of Things*, 32.

inspired the Siamese king to send his favorite son, Prince Chakrabongse, to be educated and serve in the officer corps in St Petersburg.<sup>24</sup> The Russians wanted to see Siam remain independent, but it appeared unwilling to intervene if the British and French attempted to dismember the country. The Germans also favored Siam's independence; German officials had thought Chulalongkorn might cancel the trip to France (which indeed had been postponed in his itinerary) because of poor relations between Paris and Bangkok. Berlin then judged Chulalongkorn's reception in Paris and London somewhat cool, and Kaiser Wilhelm II gloated, "That is good news, we will give His Majesty a better treatment."<sup>25</sup> In fact, Chulalongkorn, who while in France propitiously ordered the release of several Cambodians interned in Siam – the immediate irritant in Franco-Siamese relations<sup>26</sup> – was received in Paris with pomp and generosity. Journalists nevertheless discerned varying degrees of warmth or tepidness in his treatment, giving the kaiser's comment some credence.

The king arrived in France on 11 September 1897, met by President Félix Faure and a bevy of ministers. The frock-coated president made a speech, in English, welcoming the king, who was dressed in a white military tunic and plumed hat. He was then swept away to the Élysée Palace for afternoon tea with M. and Mme Faure, and on to the mansion in the fashionable Avenue Hoche rented for his accommodation. There he changed into civilian clothes and departed to leave his card for the prime minister, as protocol required, before a sumptuous banquet. (One newspaper printed the menus for all of his repasts, which it rightly labeled *pantagruéliques*.) The next day, the monarch toured Paris, the Invalides and Eiffel Tower among the stops, paused for lunch at the Siamese legation before going to the races at Longchamp, and returned for dinner with French ministers. On 13 September, he took an excursion to Vincennes, where he was served a huge lunch, with an equally caloric dinner with President Faure. Having survived these two meals, he set off the following day for a military review at Saint-Quentin in which almost 70,000 soldiers took part: a not so subtle way of parading French military might. A lunch for two hundred followed, and in his toast the king expressed admiration for the troops' efficiency and discipline. The following days saw a tour of the Sèvres porcelain factory (where Chulalongkorn was presented with two curiously chosen figurines portraying Bacchus and Iphigenia), a trip to Versailles, a performance of 'Don Juan' at the Opera, visits to the Louvre, the Bibliothèque Nationale and La Monnaie (the French mint), and a dinner at the Quai d'Orsay. On 18 September, a no doubt exhausted Chulalongkorn left Paris for Le Havre (where he stopped for lunch at President Faure's private house), bound for Britain. Before departing, he made a donation for the poor of Paris, Versailles and Le Havre.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Sending his sons abroad for part of their education was a favored strategy of Chulalongkorn, a way to strengthen ties with European courts and gain insight into European politics and military life. Prince Chakrabongse spent ten years in Russia (and contracted a morganatic marriage with a Ukrainian), and other sons studied in universities or military academies in Germany and Britain. See Narisa Chakrabongse, *Katya and the Prince of Siam* (Bangkok, 1994) on the life of her grandfather, his stay in Russia and his marriage. Félix Faure tried to persuade Chulalongkorn to send his son Prince Vajiravudh (who became King Rama VI) and Prince Chira to study in Paris (Watanangura, *The Visit of King Chulalongkorn to Europe in 1907*, 38), but he did not send the royal scions to republican France.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Volker Grabowsky, 'Thai-German Relations from King Chulalongkorn's First Visit to Europe until World War II', in Watanangura, *The Visit of King Chulalongkorn to Europe in 1907*, 61.

<sup>26</sup> Two of the French subjects, who had been imprisoned, were however deported on their release, which *Le Figaro* said allowed Siam to save face. (*Le Figaro*, 17 September 1897).

<sup>27</sup> The details of his visit are taken largely from *Le Figaro* and *Le Petit Parisien*. King Chulalongkorn returned to Paris for a brief private stay in October 1897, during which he visited the Musée Guimet (remarking that it was the first time he had seen a European museum devoted to Asian art), the Palais

France thus showed off its glories to the king, the royal heritage at Versailles and aristocratic sports at Longchamp, its treasures in cultural institutions, culinary extravaganzas noon and night, and, perhaps most significantly, military strength and political potency. The French clearly aimed to overwhelm the king with food and sights, and with a demonstration of the might of a France that was not only a colonial neighbor in Southeast Asia but also a power that brooked no refusal to agree to its demands, and that commanded the men and *matériel* to back them up.

### *The King in the French Press*

The French press, especially the illustrated periodicals, provided extensive coverage of Chulalongkorn's visit.<sup>28</sup> The mass-market *Le Petit Journal*, at the apogee of its popularity in the 1890s with a circulation of one million, featured a picture of the smart-looking king on its cover of 19 September 1897 – an image to which I shall return. As with other newspapers, its articles emphasized the way in which France had so impressed the monarch, the paper's language revealing French condescension to an Asian, no matter his regal status: "We gave him the honors of our incomparable capital and the graciousness of the Parisian population," said *Le Petit Journal*, claiming that the king had the reputation of being an ardent Anglophile. His visit produced "on the mind of this potentate a particularly grandiose and profound impression." The paper confided that the king had commented, on seeing Versailles, that hitherto he "had no idea of what was truly grand and what was really beautiful"; the king expressed surprise that the French president lived at the relatively modest Élysée Palace rather than at Versailles, a remark, the paper continued, that proved an Asian could not understand the meaning of a constitutional republic. The king was especially taken with the huge military review because "for an Asian monarch, might counts above all else." The king also marveled at a French train, which accelerated to 120 km/h just to show off its speed. Visits to the Bibliothèque Nationale and the Invalides had similarly pleased the king; a color image showed him standing bareheaded and looking meditatively at the tomb of Napoleon I, a figure he was said to admire. Chulalongkorn left Paris "enchanted," according to *Le Petit Journal*, though it cautioned that the welcome was "nevertheless not without certain reservations."<sup>29</sup>

*L'Illustration*, another mass-market newspaper, published an engraving of the Siamese king with the Russian tsar – the original photograph was much treasured by Chulalongkorn and often reproduced in Siam – as well as a drawing of the mansion where he lodged in Paris. (With *paparazzi* eager for every detail, the newspaper added that the telephone number was listed in the king's name). It noted that the king had a "sincere affection (*sympathie*)" for the French despite the recent difficulties. The paper also remarked on the widespread public interest in the Far East precipitated by his visit: "Paris is altogether Orientalist... and crowds surge after our Asian visitors to see them and in particular to be able to say: I have seen them!" For *L'Illustration*, the highlight for the king was going up the Eiffel Tower, which it commented on with pure *parisianisme*: "Though such a faded glory – or rather such a diminished height –

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de Justice and Notre-Dame cathedral; he also went shopping at Au Bon Marché. He met the president and foreign minister again, and received diplomats, including the papal nuncio. The king said he hoped to return to Paris for the *exposition universelle* in 1900, though that trip did not eventuate. (*Le Gaulois*, 12, 13, 14 October 1897).

<sup>28</sup> The newspapers quoted in this section are available online on Gallica from the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

<sup>29</sup> *Le Petit Journal*, 26 September 1897.

no longer seduces anyone except Thomas Cook tourists and provincials, it retains its power over the imagination of the king of Siam.”<sup>30</sup>

*Le Figaro*, a conservative newspaper of record, reported in detail and with detachment on the king’s visit, reflecting too on Franco-Siamese relations. It intimated that the French authorities had feared hostile demonstrations against the Siamese during his stay, but that the warm reception given to Chulalongkorn by Tsar Nicholas, an ally of the French, had reassured the public, even if gung-ho colonialists remained unmoved.<sup>31</sup> It reminded readers that though Siam might appear an Oriental fantasy, “one must not forget that the king of Siam, though his state is Asian, is a king of dignity like that of the Europeans.”<sup>32</sup> It spoke of the wealth of the king, but contrasted his riches with the poverty of ordinary Siamese. *Le Figaro* reported that other newspapers had complained of inadequate protection for French subjects in Siam, but it adopted a conciliatory tone, and ventured that some French agents were “a bit demanding towards Siam.” It agreed that British interests worked against those of France and that the Paknam treaty left many issues unresolved.<sup>33</sup>

Once Chulalongkorn set foot on French soil – *Le Figaro* pointedly mentioned his wearing the insignia of the Legion of Honor – the paper reported meticulously on the king’s movements, and printed background articles on six Siamese students studying in France, the famous Siamese white elephants and Siamese cuisine, said to include boa and putrefied eggs; an article on Buddhism was better informed. The paper recorded that the king had taken note of the prosperity of French workers as he traveled through the artisanal Rue du Faubourg Saint-Antoine. It recorded a *malentendu* at the national library, where he viewed treaties between Louis XIV and King Narai (“of a sort to inspire sage reflection by His Majesty”), and then was invited to autograph a document that librarians manifestly could not understand – the king explained it was only an insurance contract. (That the king would have been asked to write on a historical document is doubtful, but the report points to the misunderstandings about little known cultures.) Stating that real points of Franco-Siamese contention had been resolved thanks to the visit, the newspaper quoted Prime Minister Gabriel Hanotaux: “It was necessary for the King [to] get to know France and especially the Republic. He will leave loving one and esteeming the other.”<sup>34</sup> *Le Figaro* affirmed: “The sovereign, to whose ministers in 1893 we had to issue an ultimatum backed up by cannon-fire, is on the way to becoming a friend to us.... Now that he has been able to judge for himself, he knows what we are worth.”<sup>35</sup> What he had seen, concluded the paper, yielding to the patriotic rhetoric of the day, was that “France is rich, it has more beautiful cities than any other nation, it has a people it is hard to compare to any other, and finally it has an army that is capable of cutting a fine figure on any battlefield to which destiny summons it.”<sup>36</sup>

Sour notes appeared in a few commentaries. The polemicist and increasingly far right-wing editor of *L’Intransigeant*, Henri Rochefort, stormed: “Chulalongkorn, who is being received with all sorts of honors, is one of the most openly declared of our enemies, even more so because our royal servant (*serviteur*) is notoriously upheld in his claims by England, which pushes him with all its strength to make demands,

<sup>30</sup> *L’Illustration*, 11 and 18 September 1897.

<sup>31</sup> *Le Figaro*, 22 July 1897.

<sup>32</sup> *Le Figaro*, 23 July 1897.

<sup>33</sup> *Le Figaro*, 11 September 1897.

<sup>34</sup> *Le Figaro*, 18 September 1897.

<sup>35</sup> *Le Figaro*, 15 September 1897.

<sup>36</sup> *Le Figaro*, 16 September 1897.

even promising him to support them if necessary through its intervention.”<sup>37</sup> Several months before the king’s arrival, the Catholic review *Le Correspondant* published a racist diatribe that might have pleased the young official Réau: “France is getting ready to pay homage to the one who is its most cruel enemy in the Far East, and perhaps the Quai d’Orsay is on the point of abdicating the rights that belong to us in this country of the ‘white elephant’ and Asian trickery.”<sup>38</sup> The article conceded that the king was affable, dignified, and a ‘gentleman’ (using the English word), as well as being “well informed for an Asian prince,” before blackening Chulalongkorn’s reputation. It claimed that he had fathered two children before the age of fifteen and was given to such vice that, although only forty, he showed signs of “debility.” He was ignorant of foreign affairs, a spendthrift, surrounded by court intrigues and the influences of wives and concubines who inspired a policy “of hatred and hostility” towards France, a real Sardanapalus. The bad traits of the Siamese multiplied in the journalist’s estimation; they were given to frivolity and pleasure, untrustworthy, willing to sell “human flesh” for any price, corrupt, lacking in honor, lazy and wretched, apt to brigandage and murder. Such vitriol prefaced an argument that Siam presented undeniable interest for Indochina, and that it would eventually be taken over by a colonial power. That power must of course be France.

A journalist wrote only slightly less viciously in the socialist *La Petite République* at the conclusion of Chulalongkorn’s visit: “Since the king signed a treaty of friendship with us, he has no other care except to create embarrassment for us.... [Yet] he is leaving with his belly full of our most succulent food and our finest wine, his pockets bursting with gifts.” The negative opinions, and stereotypically Orientalist fantasies, in *Le Correspondant* and *La Petite République*, incidentally, were quoted word for word in the collaborationist *Le Matin* in 1941, just after Vichy-controlled French Indochina and Thailand waged a brief border war: memories and stereotypes died hard.<sup>39</sup>

Such invective in 1897 contrasted with the hospitable views of most newspapers, even when they, too, seldom neglected to mention tensions between France and Siam, though periodicals such as *Le Figaro* editorialized that discord had been exaggerated. Another conservative and bourgeois newspaper, *Le Gaulois*, made some predictably snide asides (for instance, about the number of decorations handed out by the visiting king) and criticized the Siamese for various policies. But it also thought that the French ought to be aware that Laotians in Siam claiming French protection had gone there, it said, to avoid military service. It maintained that rumors in Germany and Britain that the king had received a cool reception in France were unfounded. Indeed, the warm welcome, *Le Gaulois* remarked (perhaps tongue-in-cheek) gave one to wonder if the visit of foreign sovereigns did not make Parisians regret not having one of their own.<sup>40</sup>

The critical journalists’ strategy is patent and classically colonialist: castigating the Siamese as uncivilized and antipathetic to the French, possibly in cahoots with the British – the king’s visit came the year before the Fashoda crisis –

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<sup>37</sup> *L’Intransigeant*, undated article contained in a file entitled ‘Dossiers biographiques Boutillier du Rétail’, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Banque DOSS < FOL – LN1 – 232 (4885)

<sup>38</sup> *Le Correspondant*, 10 June 1897.

<sup>39</sup> *Le Matin*, 14 January 1941, which added: “In sparking a war, does the king of Siam remember the extraordinary gastronomic reception given to his ancestor Chulalongkorn I during his visit to Paris?” The newspaper provides a complete account of the king’s trip (including his menus). (Article contained in “Dossiers biographiques Boutillier du Rétail,” *op. cit.*)

<sup>40</sup> *Le Gaulois*, 17, 18, 19, 26, 29 September 1897.

prepared an argument for the French to conquer Siam. King Chulalongkorn may or may not have been aware of these comments. His mission was to safeguard Siam's reputation, bolster the prestige of its sovereign and counter any French designs to annex Siam. In that, the king largely succeeded. Siam and France did not become close friends because of the royal visit, but they no longer regarded each other as quite such dangerous neighbors.

*Chulalongkorn's Second Visit to Paris, 1907*

In 1907, King Chulalongkorn again journeyed to Europe, this time on a nominally private visit.<sup>41</sup> This coincided with a more auspicious moment in Franco-Siamese relations, which had stumbled along uneasily since the king's last tour and ended with dramatic territorial concessions. France had finally succeeded in forcing the king to alienate a considerable portion of Siamese territory.<sup>42</sup> In a treaty signed on 22 March 1907, just a few days before Chulalongkorn's departure from Bangkok, Siam ceded to Cambodia the three eastern provinces of Battambang, Sisophon and Siem Reap (which included Angkor Wat).<sup>43</sup> In compensation, France returned to Siam two smaller areas that it had occupied along the Laotian border and in the Chantaburi region further south, and most importantly it relinquished the bitterly resented extra-territorial privileges over French citizens, protégés and subjects (including Indochinese) it had exercised since 1893. This provided some resolution of long-standing conflicts, though it put paid to any real or residual French hopes – largely dashed by British opposition and the Anglo-French *entente cordiale* in any case – for complete takeover of Siam. A journalist in *Le Figaro* stated that the accord provided a good backdrop to Chulalongkorn's visit. It also congratulated the king for his continuing pursuit of modernization, though adding rather pointedly that such initiatives followed from “the lessons of the West.” The journalist drew a parallel between Siam and Japan, and speaking of Britain's alliance with Japan, suggested that France might now develop a similarly beneficial relationship with independent Siam.<sup>44</sup>

If the evolution of international and colonial affairs eased the king's path to France in 1907, a domestic development momentarily disrupted the visit, a revolt of winegrowers in the Midi. Just as the king was scheduled to dine with President

<sup>41</sup> The tour, in principle lasted from 27 March to 17 November 1907 and took the king to Italy, France, Britain, Denmark, Norway and Sweden. A notable omission from the itinerary was Russia, which had been humiliatingly defeated by Japan in 1904-1905 and which was still coming to grips with the failed revolution in 1905.

<sup>42</sup> See Tuck, *The French Wolf and the Siamese Lamb*, and Brailey, *Imperial Amnesia*, for details of their relations over the ten-year period.

<sup>43</sup> There had also been a treaty in 1904 which obliged Siam to appoint French advisers to the government. Bangkok duly engaged at least half a dozen advisers, who were tasked, in particular, with the codification of Siamese laws. The codification commission was led by Georges Padoux and worked from 1905 to 1913. King Chulalongkorn was not entirely satisfied with their work, writing in 1910 that “Padoux and his five assistants are quite incapable of making a code.” The problem seemed to be their lack of competency in English (in which they were drafting the document), though three of the commissioners had been sent to London to improve their language skills. Padoux returned to Paris, suffering from ill health, in 1912. Another member of the commission, René Guyon, however, remained in Thailand until his death in 1963, becoming a Thai citizen in 1942 (as Phichan Bunyong) and serving as chief judge of the Thai Supreme Court. He wrote a multi-volume *Études de l'éthique sexuelle* (Paris, 1929-1938), in which he championed sexual emancipation of men, women and also children, and he published poetry and works on metaphysics, psychology, tolerance and cruelty. (See Tamara Lynn Loos, *Subject Siam: Family, Law, and Colonial Modernity in Thailand* (Ithaca, NY, 2006), 62-64.)

<sup>44</sup> *Le Figaro*, 20 June 1907.

Armand Fallières at the Élysée Palace, confrontations took a violent turn. On 20 June, in Perpignan, the prefecture was pillaged and burned, and in Narbonne, after a policeman was attacked, soldiers fired on the crowd, killing five and wounding thirty-three. At Chulalongkorn's request, the banquet was cancelled, though his thoughts about the demonstrations remain unknown.

Chulalongkorn in fact passed through France on several occasions in 1907, for a brief visit in June and for a longer stay in August, that second sojourn nearly overlapping with visits by the khedive of Egypt and the king of Greece. A highlight for Chulalongkorn was a night spent at the château of Rambouillet as a guest of the president, the occasion marked by a grand banquet, a *naumachie* (a mock naval battle on the waterways) and a fireworks display. The king also found time for visits to several art *salons* and the Sèvres and Gobelins works.<sup>45</sup>

During his tour, the king wrote lengthy and lively letters to his daughter Princess Nipanopadol. He observed that Paris streets appeared empty during the August vacation, and told his daughter that not just the elite but also the middle classes abandoned Paris for holidays. Parks especially intrigued the king, and he explained that because Westerners inhabited buildings without gardens or terraces, unlike the Siamese, they needed parks for relaxation. He advanced a novel theory: since Westerners sat in chairs rather than on the floor, they suffered from blood draining to their feet; only outdoors could they stretch out comfortably. Chulalongkorn reported that he went shopping at the Grands Magasins du Louvre, which he found inferior to the Kaufhaus des Westens department store in Berlin. He enjoyed the Eiffel Tower once again and stocked up on souvenirs at its shop. He pronounced French pastries very tasty. He compared a comic opera performance to Siamese *spectacles*, finding French performances, especially the dances, unrestrained in comparison with the stylized choreography of Siamese dance. He described Fontainebleau and Versailles to his daughter, showing himself an avid sightseer and a fond father. He said, perhaps with a touch of regret at the end of the tour, that nevertheless he could not visit all the sights – might he have wished to spend time in Paris' cafés and cabarets?<sup>46</sup>

### Conclusion

King Chulalongkorn both reigned and ruled; his visits to Europe encompassed pomp and pageantry, but were also exercises of the real power the throne held in Siam and of the king's agency in determining its policies and its alliances. Irene Stengs points out that “hardly any European today knows that King Chulalongkorn visited Europe. In Thailand, on the contrary, the European journeys are remembered and celebrated as great events of Thai history.”<sup>47</sup> On the centenary of the 1897 tour, Bangkok hosted a conference and an exhibition on the king's travels; there were commemorative volumes and television documentaries. Chulalongkorn remains the most important figure in modern Thai history, and the significance of the European trips for the Thais,

<sup>45</sup> *Le Figaro*, 19 May 1907, 13, 15, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 26, 30 June 1907, 15, 22, 26, 29 July 1907, 5, 6, 7, 9, 12, 16, 19, 20, 22, 23, 24 August 1907, 20, 24, 26 September 1907.

<sup>46</sup> Selections from Chulalongkorn's letters appear in *Klai Ban / Far from Home / Fern von Zuhause / Loin des siens: King Chulalongkorn's Letters from Germany, England and France to Her Royal Highness Princess Nipanopadol in His Visit to Europe in 1907* (Bangkok, 1997 [first published in 1923]); 142-70 for the letters from France.

<sup>47</sup> Stengs, *Worshipping the Great Moderniser*, 56.

at the time of Chulalongkorn and afterwards, is embodied in several mementos produced in France.<sup>48</sup>

Iconography forms an important aspect of royal power, and the images of Chulalongkorn created in Paris (and elsewhere) are numerous and revealing. The illustrated periodicals contained photographs, drawings and engravings of the king, posed in portraits or sketched informally, and La Monnaie struck commemorative medals. Three images proved particularly important. One is a portrait of the king by the high-society painter Charles Durand, generally known as Carolus-Durand. In 1897, the artist held the prestigious post of director of the French Academy in Rome, and Chulalongkorn posed for him while holidaying on the Riviera; Carolus-Durand delivered the painting to him in Paris, where it went on display before being shipped to Bangkok. It shows the monarch in full dress uniform wearing a white tunic and dark trousers, carrying a sword, a staff and a plumed hat, his chest covered with medals and a sash, around his shoulders the gold-embroidered surcoat traditionally worn by the king, royal family and senior dignitaries for the most important ceremonial occasions.<sup>49</sup> The portrait now hangs in the drawing room of the French Renaissance-style Phra Thinang Boromphiman mansion in the Grand Palace complex in Bangkok.<sup>50</sup>

Chulalongkorn was much impressed with the statue of Louis XIV in front of the palace at Versailles. In 1907 he commissioned an equestrian statue – the monument traditionally reserved for monarchs and military heroes – of himself to stand outside the palace in the new Ratchadamnoen Avenue in Bangkok, a boulevard modeled on the Champs-Élysées. Georges Saulo's figure of the king and Clovis Masson's horse are typical of the genre, though with the horse unusually standing still rather than in movement (which Stengs says may be a nod to Buddhist iconography). Unveiled in Bangkok in 1908, the statue has become the central site of the cult of Chulalongkorn 'The Beloved King'. Crowds gather around it on special occasions, and some believe that the spirit of the king descends from the heavens to enter the statue at 10.00 pm each Tuesday, the weekday of his birth.<sup>51</sup>

The third and most important image is the cover of *Le Petit Journal* of 19 September 1897 mentioned earlier, a much revered object; originals now fetch close to \$2,000 in Thailand, and with many 'antique' copies and modern reproductions on sale. The hand-colored engraving was based on a photograph by Robert Lenz, who had opened a studio in Bangkok in 1890.<sup>52</sup> It shows a youthful king in dress uniform, holding a rolled-up document. The French newspaper's pictorial rendition of the dignified, alert, regal personage does not entirely accord with some of the ambivalent rhetoric used by journalists, but what remains important for Thais is the image itself, a virtual consecration of the king by the Paris press. According to Stengs, "The gloriousness the visit symbolizes gives the *Le Petit Journal* front page its special aura. More than many other portraits, this portrait is a direct material testimony of the

<sup>48</sup> Stengs remarks that the tours of 1897 and 1907 have become "fused" in Thai national memory, *Worshipping the Great Moderniser*, 55.

<sup>49</sup> This gold robe, the *sua khruai*, is a particular emblem of Thai royalty and high officials. See Julia M. Brennan and Yaowalak Bunnag, "Thai Official Rank Robes (*sua khruai*): History, Fabrication and the Conservation of Admiral de Richelieu's Nineteenth Century Robe," *Arts of Asia* (2014): 99-113.

<sup>50</sup> Naengnoi Saksri, Narisa Chakrabongse and Thanit Limpabandhu, *The Grand Palace and Old Bangkok* (Bangkok, 2014), 119. The French newspapers noted the delivery of the painting to the king, and its display in Paris, in 1907.

<sup>51</sup> Stengs, *Worshipping the Great Moderniser*, 85-86, and Peleggi, *Lords of Things*, 107.

<sup>52</sup> Lenz also took numerous photographs of the king and his entourage during their tours of the Malay states.

king's achievements during his important and difficult mission.”<sup>53</sup> It bespeaks national pride in the king's success in avoiding colonial takeover when the *patrie* was most in danger. He proved himself the peer of European sovereigns, a beloved and accomplished ruler pictured in French periodicals, cast in bronze, painted in oil and struck in medals.

The French perspective was somewhat different. For most of the French, their views formed by the press reports of the king's visit, Chulalongkorn was a fascinating fairy-tale royal, a celebrity from afar, an Oriental potentate of legend – with palaces, concubines and golden regalia – come to life. For some nationalists and colonialists, in 1897, however, he was a despot, a villain and an enemy, leaguings with France's rivals, holding the subjects of its Asian territories captive, and thwarting its colonial ambitions. For yet others, especially by 1907, by which time, of course, a large amount of territory had been wrested from the king and incorporated into the French protectorate of Cambodia, Chulalongkorn was a potential ally.

The royal visits marked key moments in the arc of Franco-Siamese relations and in France's engagement in Southeast Asia. The newspaper reports, the letters and the iconography show, over a ten-year interval, the metamorphosis of Franco-Siamese relations from a state of near war and the threat of French conquest in the 1890s to an *entente*, despite a considerable loss of territory for the Siamese, in 1907. Although a *rapprochement* between Siam and France followed, the country enjoyed stronger relations with Britain than with France during this period; Bangkok also retained cordial links with Germany. There was considerable domestic debate about which side Siam should support in the First World War. Bangkok eventually declared war on Germany on 23 July 1917 and sent an expeditionary force to France in late July 1918.<sup>54</sup> Siam thus emerged from the Great War as a nominal French ally, participating among the victors in the peace negotiations, though twenty-two years later there occurred that brief war between France and Thailand in 1940-1941.<sup>55</sup>

The king's tours in 1897 and 1907 provided a novel occasion for the French to see a regnant East Asian ruler, one whose kingdom hovered perilously in their eyes between barbarism and modernization, a possible enemy, ally or prey for colonial conquest, the king himself an intriguing ruler of an exotic country. For the Thais, there was pride in their sovereign's reception as the head of state of one of the few remaining independent countries in Asia. There remained the legacy that Chulalongkorn left behind, one hard to overestimate for the king's compatriots. The king himself had played an active role in warding off even greater incursions and exactions by colonialists, and the personal diplomacy he conducted during his European tours played a significant role in that achievement.

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<sup>53</sup> Stengs, *Worshipping the Great Moderniser*, 109-11.

<sup>54</sup> Over a thousand Siamese formed part of the force, and nineteen were killed. Their ashes were returned to Siam and in 1919 buried in the Monument to the Expeditionary Forces, which takes the form of a Buddhist stupa. Participation in war meant that Siamese soldiers marched in the victory parades in Paris, the country became one of the founding members of the League of Nations, and “the humiliating diplomatic and economic concessions to the western powers were scrapped” (Suksri, Chakrabongse and Limpabandhu, *The Grand Palace and Old Bangkok*, 242.).

<sup>55</sup> The Victory Monument in Bangkok, an obelisk with figures of servicemen and civilians at the base, commemorates the Thai victory; in 1945, Thailand was obliged to return the captured provinces to Cambodia.