

INTERNATIONAL

THESIS ABSTRACTS

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King Rama V and the Abolition of Slavery in Siam (Thailand)

Slavery, we may say, is one of the most important obstacles to human prosperity and the progress of human civilization. During the period when about one-half of the world's population consisted of slaves we can hardly say that men were civilized. Slavery appeared as a period of history. Almost every country had her own period of slavery and then abolished the institution. Thailand is one of such countries.

Slavery, however, is not Thai in origin. According to Thai history, Siam was first ruled by a paternalistic king. In that case the king and all people had a relationship of father and sons. Under that kind of relationship all men were brothers and there was no chance for slavery. But that was the situation during the Sukhotai period. The situation changed as time went on. In the Sri Ayuthya period Siam adopted the Divine Kingship system from the Khmer and Mon, who had received this system from India. Under the Divine Kingship system, the King and his people had a relationship of master and servant, and men were no longer brothers. Under this condition, slavery arose and became a growing institution in Thai society.

Slavery had dominated Thai society for about five hundred years before it came to an end during the reign of King Rama V of Bangkok. During the reigns of the first four kinds of Bangkok slavery rose to its climax status. It had strong legal justification and was widely accepted as one of the Thai traditions. The rights that the slave-owners had over their slaves were quite strong.

When King Rama V first assumed his throne, he began to plan to abolish slavery. But the problems of slavery were very complex. The matter seemed too difficult to the young King, who did not have much experience in administration. Most of the slave-owners were the high ranking officials, who were very influential, and about three-fourths of the people were slaves of various grades. It is very interesting that King Rama V, though he was young, had the strong intention to abolish slavery and to modernize Siam in many other ways. He devoted his entire reign to doing this, and finally succeeded. His success resulted not simply from his absolute authority, but largely from his tolerance, keenness, and prudence. He used his leadership more than his absolute authority. His plans were carefully set. All problems were carefully considered in advance and many alternatives to solve those problems were carefully considered. A deliberative Council was set up. Public opinion was counted as public advice. Though he was an absolute king he carried out this work in a very democratic way. The way he carried out his work is a very good example in administration even for today.

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