

PRINCE DAMRONG RAJANUBHAB FOUNDER OF MODERN THAI PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION - AN APPRECIATION

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June 21, 2505 is the centennial of a most auspicious day in the history of modern Thailand. On that day one hundred years ago a son was born to King Mongkut, a child who came to be known as H.R.H. Somdej Krom Phya Damrong Rajanubhab.

In her long and lively history Thailand has had a plentiful share of heroes and great men, and it would be most difficult to rank one above all the others. But certainly one of the nation's most famous, most loved, and most talented men of the past century is Prince Damrong. Some men plant trees whose fruits are enjoyed by later generations. Prince Damrong planted many of the seeds of modern public administration in Thailand, and thus made a large and lasting contribution to the strength and survival of the nation he loved so well.

Some months ago, as I was looking over my notes on the development of the Thai civil service, I remembered that the great Prince had been born a hundred years ago, and I thought that it would be most fitting for this journal of public administration to honor his memory on the centennial of his birth. I was asked to contribute these brief comments, and I find it both pleasant and difficult to write them - - pleasant because Prince Damrong is such a superior and satisfying personality to contemplate, and difficult because I am so inadequate to the task of discussing his life and contributions. The best I can do is to offer a small testimonial. Countless Thais are better acquainted with Prince Damrong's life and writings than I am. I can add little or nothing to what they already know.

The man looms large in the history of Thailand in the late 19th and early 20th centuries A.D., which correspond to the middle 25th century of the Buddhist era. His works and his fame have outlasted his own span of years, which included more than three decades of service to his King and country.

Without Prince Damrong's contribution it is possible that the history of Thailand from B.E. 2436 (A.D. 1893) might have been different. Certainly the public administration of the nation would not have become so able and effective, and the domestic government of the nation would not have been so well organized. Prince Damrong's shining contribution was made possible because of the great trust and affection of King Chulalongkorn, his older half-brother. It was a trust well justified. Without the work and never-failing support of the Prince, the reign of Rama V could not have been so successful as it was.

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The two greatest achievements of the Fifth Reign were the successful diplomatic accommodation with the west, particularly France and Great Britain, and the reformation of the government which largely replaced the traditional administration with a modern bureaucracy. These two developments were not entirely separate. National security was a major reason for administrative reform.

Prince Damrong's greatest service was in the development of the modern administrative system, but as every Thai knows, it was not limited to this. Prince Damrong was a diplomat, a historian, a scholar, a politician, and even a poet.

He was mortal, so I am sure he was not perfect, although I know nothing of the flaws in his personality. Perhaps his historical writing leaves something to be desired on grounds of scholarship, but he stimulated and supported the study of the history of Thailand more than any other person of his time. And Prince Damrong also made some of that history himself.

I am no learned judge of Thai poetry, but I doubt that in all Thai literature there is a more stirring poem than Prince Damrong's Reply in Verse to Rama V (translated by Professor James N. Mosel in the *Journal of the Siam Society*, Bangkok, Vol. XLVII, Part 1, June, 1959, pp. 104-111). The courage, the wisdom, the loyalty and the discipline of the man stand forth in its lines:

*May it please you, sire; most noble one above us;
I stand in confidence and gratitude, and yet in tears.
Your lines have come to hand and eye
And my thought to your illness turns,
Your illness shared in truth by all your nation...
If blood and flesh could blend as balm or herb,
I would in haste give mine to heal...*

The poem has its lesson for those who would passively accept the forces of fate. At a critical time, when the French threat was at its height, Damrong compared the nation to "a ship that flounders in the sea." He pointed out that "if doom so decrees, then every vessel shall be lost."

*These things the hearts of mariners know well
But while their decks remain afloat
They meet the sea with their united strength
And bring their craft to shore, rejoicing to survive.*

*If their strivings fail, and they go down,
 The world will call it fate and know their death was not in vain
 But were neglect to still their toil
 And make them vacillate, confused,
 And cease to mend their ship,
 The ship is lost ...*

So let us struggle on, and may the evil days pass, urged the Prince. I suppose every Thai knows the poem, and the story of its effects upon the morale of King Chulalongkorn. But I doubt if anyone thinks of this as an administrative poem, which in a sense it is.

Intelligent men will agree that public administration is essential in our times. Many of them will probably add that it is also a dull, tedious subject, full of details and endless problems which can never be satisfactorily solved. And this is true, as any student at the Institute of Public Administration can testify. But it is only part of the truth, and not the most important part.

Some writer on public administration -- I forget who it was -- described administration as "the art of the possible," meaning that administration is concerned with doing practical, sensible things. Of course this is true -- but it is only one part of the truth. Prince Damrong would have described administration as "the art of the *necessary*," leaving Fate to determine what was possible. His administrative sailors would meet the sea with their united strength, and never cease to mend their ship.

Boldness and courage lie at the heart of great administration. These were the virtues Prince Damrong urged in his poem -- and practiced in his ministry. Here, I believe, is the essence of administrative wisdom -- to be concerned with what is necessary, and not merely what seems possible. And in this poem, too, I find one key to the administrative genius of the great Prince, a courage and boldness which -- tempered with other skills -- made possible that which was necessary.

Prince Damrong's writings are full of warmth and humor as well as wisdom. They reveal the other characteristics of the man which made him great.

The most important of these was his fundamental dedication to something beyond himself. Prince Damrong may, for all I know, have been a very proud man. He certainly must have had a great sense of self-confidence, or he would not have undertaken such ventures as the reorganization of the Ministry of Interior. Perhaps he was quite impatient with small and foolish

men -- I don't know. But all his efforts were devoted to a purpose which he regarded as greater than himself -- his King and his country. This fundamental unselfishness is beyond any doubt the most important characteristic of the man -- it is the sun which shines upon his works and makes them glow. It is the purpose which gave meaning to all that he did or sought to do.

Being able to see beyond the mirrored walls of his own ego, Prince Damrong was able to concentrate his attention upon "the necessities" which are the ultimate underlying aims of administration. He was never diverted from the main goals of his organization. In the crude language of American administration, he could "think big". He did not mistake the details of activity for the substance of its purpose.

Courage, unselfishness, and a sense of purpose are essential to great administration, but even these are not enough. At least two more traits are required: a persistent attention to the detailed activity by which purposes are converted into practical possibilities, and the ability to lead the men whose efforts will inevitably produce success or failure for the administrative organization. Prince Damrong had both these talents. And in this incredible combination of abilities lay the greatness of the man as an administrator.

When I think of Prince Damrong, a number of incidents in his eventful life always come into my mind -- his first days in the Ministry of Interior, his amazing inspection trip to the North, and the wisdom and adaptability with which he proceeded to form a new system of domestic government to carry forward the aims of King Chulalongkorn.

On April 1, 1892, Prince Damrong was appointed Minister of Interior. Seven days earlier he had returned from a tour of Europe, Egypt, and India, expecting to resume his work as Minister of Education. His new instructions were to develop the administration of the provinces into a modern system of domestic government in order to eliminate an excuse for foreign aggression. The French had already occupied Luang Prabang. Foreign relations were rapidly reaching a crisis. Within little more than a year French gunboats would invade the Menam Chao Phya. And at the age of 30, Prince Damrong was assigned to reorganize that most tradition-ridden of all Thai ministries, the very center of the ancient *kin muang* system, and to produce an effective, modern system of domestic government. He inherited a small headquarters staff. As Phya Mahammarthyatibordi later noted, "When it came to the border provinces, they had only heard the names, but did not know exactly where they were -- even on the map they could hardly tell where they were. So they did not know how the foreigners menaced the borders both in the east and the west and it was useless to discuss these events with them at that time."

With consummate wisdom, Prince Damrong proceeded to acquaint himself with the affairs of the Ministry, making no important changes in the first months (with the exception of Phya:

SriSahatep's premature effort at local government reorganization at Bang Pa-in). In six months Damrong felt he had a grasp of the work of central headquarters, and in October, 1892, he set out on an inspection tour which revealed the full range of the problems he faced. This celebrated tour included a venture in tax collection which indicated the shrewdness of the new Minister. And it gave Prince Damrong time to study. He returned to Bangkok, barges loaded almost to sinking with tax money, with a clear sense of purpose and the plan of the Tesapiban system.

In his first months as Minister Damrong had become acutely aware of the financial problems he faced. His cleverness in meeting them was an auspicious omen. In discussing financial needs with the Minister of Finance before making his inspection, Prince Damrong was told that large quantities of *suzi* had not been collected in the provinces, and was asked if he would collect the money. The Prince was wisely reluctant to go into the provinces in the unpopular role of a tax collector. He explored the matter with Phya Woraput Pokai, head of the Department of Suai in the Finance Ministry, and the two men devised an ingenious scheme. When Prince Damrong went north, he took with him the records of delinquent taxes; he met with the officials responsible for collection and he offered them a chance to settle their delinquent accounts at fifty percent of the indebtedness. Some even borrowed money to take advantage of this bargain, and Prince Damrong collected 200,000 ticals during his inspection without incurring any serious resentment. All of this was in coin, as paper currency was not in use at the time. The money was turned over to the Ministry of Finance, and in commending Prince Damrong for his efforts, King Chulalongkorn also cautioned him to be economical in his plans for the development of the Ministry.

Money never ceased to be a problem for the Ministry of Interior, but the shortage of funds did not prevent the rapid development of the tesapiban system. The practical wisdom and shrewdness which produced 200,000 ticals continued to produce results.

Behind the practical wisdom lay a grasp of the grand objective of the Ministry. Prince Damrong himself has written of the many hours he spent in thought and study as his three launches moved up the river from Bangkok. He examined the ancient laws governing provincial administration, and concluded that

... the purpose of public administration must be the maintenance of the peace and contentment of the people. This new concept is different from the old one. The old concept was that the nation should be free from danger, such as the danger of bandits. This was called 'to be in peace,' and can be traced in the law. Thus if the governor was able to maintain order and peace so that no robbery occurred, he would be regarded as achieving his purpose...

"The concept that the country must be improved even in time of peace is a new one..." And this was the concept that guided Prince Damrong in planning the new Ministry of Interior, and the new system of domestic government which it was to administer.

The monthon pattern of organization was one basic reflection of Damrong's genius. The use of monthons was not entirely new; King Chulalongkorn had established five monthons in the years before 1892. But Damrong's plan called for an integrated network of regional organizations, linking the provinces and the capital, undermining the traditional *hin muang* system, and in effect centralizing real control over the provinces by decentralizing a part of that control to the new regional power centers.

The monthon system grew in a fairly flexible fashion, as resources permitted and needs demanded. Under Prince Damrong, the tesapiban system led to the establishment of perhaps the first systematic executive development training program in Thailand. This began in January, 1894 (B.E. 2437), with the first of a series of annual meetings of monthon commissioners, called tesapiban meetings.

Prince Damrong had asked King Chulalongkorn to issue a statement to the monthon commissioners who had come to the week-long conference. The King's memorandum was a document of historic significance to Thai administration:

The greatest difficulty of the present day is the protection of our territory... Today we have Britain at our left and France at our right... We can no longer live in isolation as once we did. In our protection of the country three measures can be taken: friendly diplomatic relations, the maintenance of defensive forces, and orderly administration. We will administer the country well if we foster opportunities for the people to earn livings so that they are benefited by the government. Then they will pay the taxes which are the economic foundation of the government. Consequently, an effective administration and a fostering of the way of providing for the livelihood of the people are the most important, the final purposes of the Kingdom.

"...Effective administration and a fostering of the ways of providing for the livelihood of the people..." - - these were the prime concerns of the new Ministry of Interior, and one of the great accomplishments of modern Thailand was the development of that Ministry to carry out its task under the leadership of Prince Damrong. Of course other organizations were also involved. Some of them, ministries established under the great reorganization of A.D. 1892, were of limited effectiveness in their early years. Others depended greatly for their effectiveness upon the Ministry of Interior, which in effect became almost a "Ministry for Domestic Government."

The development of the Ministry of Interior after 1892 was also to a very great extent the development of modern public administration in Thailand. Many of the ideas and techniques of present-day administration can be traced back to Damrong's ministry.

But Prince Damrong began his contribution to modern administration in Thailand before he became Minister of Interior. About A.D. 1881 Pra Ong Chao Disavara Kumar, as the Prince was then called, conceived of the idea of forming a Survey Department. The great Indian trigonometric mapping survey was at that time being carried to the western borders of Thailand under the direction of a British surveyor, Mr. James McCarthy. In A.D. 1881 McCarthy was hired by the Royal Telegraph Department to survey a telegraph line between Bangkok and Moulmein.

Prince Damrong, a young lad of only nineteen, occupying a responsible officer's position in the royal bodyguard, quickly recognized the usefulness of mapping surveys, and in 1882 as a result of his suggestions McCarthy was engaged as the Thai government surveyor and instructed to establish a school to train thirty men from the royal bodyguard in the techniques of surveying and mapping. About ten of them developed into able students and workers. McCarthy was made a captain in the royal bodyguard, and with his assistants began the slow, difficult work of making an accurate map of the country. In 1885 his organization was designated the Royal Survey Department. One of the early modern administrative organizations established during the Fifth Reign, it produced maps and informations which were of increasing value in later years, as boundary conflicts needed to be settled, railway lines needed to be planned, and modern military administration came into existence. Established in part as a result of Prince Damrong's support, it was perhaps the earliest of his long list of contributions to the administration of the Kingdom.

In 1892 Prince Damrong reaped a reward for his help in creating the Royal Survey Department, for he obtained from it an administrative assistant who rose to a position of great power and responsibility in the Ministry of Interior. Nai Seng Wiriyasiri was a young man educated at Reverend Samuel McFarland's Suan Anand school. He graduated about A.D. 1883 and was assigned to work under Prince Damrong, an officer of the royal bodyguard. When McCarthy was employed, Nai Seng was assigned to him as student and enterpreter. Under McCarthy's guidance young Seng learned cartography, travelled widely, assisted in mapping the frontiers, developed a full command of English, and acquired wisdom and administrative talent. In April, A.D. 1892, having achieved the rank of Luang Tesachit Pichan he was in the north at Luang Prabang when Prince Damrong summoned him home to join the staff of the Ministry.

Ultimately he became vice-minister, and under his later title of Phya Maha-ammarthyatibordi he helped write the history of the Ministry -- as well as make it.

Prince Damrong went forward to make other significant contributions to government and administration. He was instrumental in the establishment of Siriraj Hospital and the medical school which evolved from it. He became the first head of the Department of Public Instruction and then in A.D. 1889 was elevated to the position of Minister of Education. During this time King Chulalongkorn was experimenting with a new pattern of ministerial organization, as a careful prelude to the 1892 reorganization. On the basis of the ability which Prince Damrong showed in these years of trouble and change, the King decided that Damrong should be appointed to the more difficult and challenging post of Minister of Interior.

It was in the great and creative period of Prince Damrong's ministry that the foundations of modern Thai public administration were established, and the Ministry of Interior pointed the way to this development. Not all of Prince Damrong's developments were completely new. The payment of monthly salaries to officials, for example, first began in the years before 1892. But Prince Damrong, wisely and carefully choosing practices which would advance the Ministry's -- and the nation's -- aims, developed within the Ministry of Interior a complex, specialized, and generally efficient *system* of modern administration.

Prince Damrong was no radical; he did not make changes simply for the sake of making changes. He carefully retained tradition wherever it promised to be useful. The traditional name of the Ministry, for example, was kept, even though it was not a literally correct description. The traditional provincial governors were not swept aside. Instead they were brought under control and gradually absorbed into a new governmental system: controlled by the monthon from above, limited by the district officers and the re-established pattern of village government from below, checked by the royal page inspectors and by new laws, regulations and a new system of communications, the ancient Ayuḍhyan tradition of *kin muang* government in the provinces was gently but quite effectively smothered.

Personnel problems were a persistent difficulty of the new ministry. One of them was simply finding able people who would go and "live in the jungle." In the early years, Prince Damrong delayed the extension of the monthon system rather than appoint monthon commissioners who would not be satisfactory. He developed a training program for young officials of local government, again moving carefully and experimentally. And out of Prince Damrong's concern with the effective selection and training of officials grew the Civil Service School which later became one of Thailand's great universities.

interests. His education never ended, for he was a student all his life, and one important part of his contribution to Thailand is a fund of wisdom and learning for the generations which followed him.

A student is simply a person who seeks knowledge and understanding. The good administrator must always be a student, for he can never have too much of these things. There is no better example of this fact than the life of Prince Damrong. He was a life-time student, and he made students of his officials. The Ministry of Interior under Prince Damrong developed an impressive training apparatus -- not because this was "modern," or "proper" or "Western" but simply because it was necessary. The tesapiban meetings, the provincial schools, the Royal Pages School, the "Golden Book" which was studied so diligently by young officials seeking advancement in the Ministry -- these and other training devices were developed because Prince Damrong recognized that administrators must ever be students, and that their study must be concerned with *useful* knowledge and understanding, not merely memorized facts with which to pass some examination. The modern tradition of training in the Thai civil service goes back to the great reforms of King Chulalongkorn; and Prince Damrong contributed as much to its development as any man. In this tradition and its meaning there is an important lesson for today's students of public administration.

Another basic lesson can be no better illustrated than by a study of Prince Damrong's life and work: in administration, one often proceeds from point A to point B by indirection. "Administration does not move in a straight line," in other words. Major changes and large purposes are not accomplished in any simple fashion. The aim of integrating provincial government into a national system, for example, involved establishing control over the traditional provincial governors. This could not be done by merely issuing orders or changing laws. Rather, to get to this "point B" it was necessary first to develop a more effective central headquarters in the Ministry of Interior, to plan and develop a menthon system, to reorganize local government, to develop fiscal resources, to select and train hundreds of officials, and to do many other things -- meanwhile never losing sight of the basic aim. There is much profit in studying the career of Prince Damrong. It is full of invaluable cases in public administration. The story of his life and his work should be required study for those who would be administrators in Thailand. I can think of no more fruitful enterprise in this hundredth year of his birth than an administrative biography of Prince Damrong, the father of modern public administration in Thailand.