

## SUMMARY

**"The Thai will go to all lengths for they have  
an exceedingly wise and able leader";**

**A Commentary on Historical Leadership Characteristics in Thailand**

*by Col. Snit. Pothisuke*

The intense impression derived from the reading of "*Namatha River Valley*",<sup>1</sup> particularly the passage on the importance of historical approach as a means to a rational study of an administrative system of a country, has led the author to write this article. The author, however, has used as title of his article, a remark made by a Khmer officer to his superior in connection with a Thai patriot named "Phra Ruang" at the time the Thai kingdom of Lopburi (now a province in Central Thailand) was under bondage to the Khmer King.

The author has also based his article on "Phra Ruang"—a play written by His Majesty King Rama VI and from which instances are freely drawn to illustrate the various characteristics of Phra Ruang as a leader.

Although Phra Ruang has now become a legend in Thai history, to the extent of being considered a myth by some, His Majesty King Rama VI has taken pains to point out in the preface of his play that Phra Ruang really existed. Events centred upon this historic personage can be summarized as follows: Ten centuries ago, while the Thai kingdom of Sukothai was independent, another Thai kingdom of Lopburi, its southern neighbour and frequent rival, was under bondage to the King of the Khmer. Among other impositions, the Khmer had forced the Thai to convey to them every three years fifty cartloads of water from a lake (now known as Choopsorn Lake in Lopburi Province, central Thailand) to serve as drinking water for the Khmer King.

Once such tribute was delayed. The Khmer King thereupon despatched a mission to exact the water tribute themselves, by force if need be. The force, composed of 50 carts

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<sup>1</sup> Suchee Boonyanupharb, connotations by Choo Karnjanaprakorn, *Namatha River Valley* (Bangkok: The Provincial Printing Press of the Ministry of Interior, 1963)

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and 1,000 men, was commanded by one Nak Khum whose utterance later was to become a by-word in Thai history and administration. The force was met by Nai Ruang, a man in charge of the Lake. Nai Ruang proposed that the same amount of water could be transported in a fewer number of containers in the form of "chalorm" baskets.

When ultimately the "chalorm," were made and the water transported to the Khmer king, the latter, sensing that a wit and creative genius had been born among the Thai, immediately ordered that his life be taken lest he should prove too dangerous for the administration. Nai Ruang, learning of this death order, fled from Lopburi and became a monk in the free Thai kingdom of Sukothai. The tracking of Nai Ruang reached its climax when a Khmer found his way into the monastery and met Nai Ruang in person. Not knowing that this monk from whom he was inquiring about Nai Ruang's whereabouts was Nai Ruang himself, the Khmer waited while the monk in question departed presumably to fetch the coveted person only to come back later with a handful of men who promptly arrested the alien inquirer. One can still see to-day in this monastery a stone column marking this historic spot.

In B.E. 1502 (A.D. 1459), the ruler of Sukothai kingdom died, leaving no one to succeed him. On popular request, Nai Ruang relinquished the order to accept the kingship. It was King Ruang (called Phra Ruang in Thailand) who later liberated Lopburi from the Khmer.

### **The significance of Leadership**

Modern public administration has placed significant stress on leadership and leadership qualities. Experts in the field of public administration now generally agree that, for maximum work efficiency, authority and co-operation are integral factors. The two, however, do not always co-exist, creating thereby an immense problem in many a quarter. The answer lies in leadership. Lack of co-operation typifies defects in a work situation. On the part of a subordinate, this defect may mean lack of discipline or inherently bad character. On the part of a superior, it can only mean one thing — lack of leadership or leadership qualities.

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The case of Phra Kru Srivichai, a monk in the northern province of Chiangmai, is a well-known example of first class leadership. As a monk he possessed no worldly authority whatever, and yet it was his leadership qualities that make the villagers construct, voluntarily and for gratis, a motor road up to the peak of Doi Suthep Hill in that province.

### The qualities of leadership

O. Glenn Stahl, in his *Public Personnel Administration*,<sup>1</sup> mentioned a survey of modern research studies by one writer which resulted in the following conclusions as to qualities making for successful leadership : higher-than-average intelligence, well-rounded interests and aptitudes, unusual facility with language, mental and emotional maturity, powerful inner drive or motivation striving for accomplishment, full awareness of the importance of co-operative effort in getting things done, understanding and practicing social skills, and a greater reliance on administrative skills than on technical skills.

In his book *Management in the Public Service*<sup>2</sup> John D. Millett has drawn up a list of characteristics usually to be found in leaders, as follows : good health, personal energy, and physical endurance ; a sense of mission, a sense of personal commitment to a cause or purpose, enthusiasm, self-confidence interest in other people, a sense of friendliness, a concern for others ; intelligence (not necessarily profound knowledge about detailed or highly specialized matters but good common sense) ; integrity, a sense of moral duty and of fairness, willingness to share achievement, the capacity to set standards of personal and official conduct which will command the respect of others ; persuasiveness ; judgement and loyalty.

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<sup>1</sup> O. Glenn Stahl, *Public Personnel Administration*. (4th ed. : New York, Harper & Brothers, 1956) p. 257.

<sup>2</sup> John D. Millett, *Management in the Public Service* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1954), p. 33.

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In the author's view, a leader must necessarily be endowed with certain characteristics or qualities desired by his society and which are over and above those normally found in the majority of people, among them being better personality, loftier virtues, higher ability and work efficiency and sound health.

Returning to the remark made by Nak Khum, the Khmer water tribute supervisor mentioned earlier, and which forms the title of this article, the author poses two questions which we should do well to answer, namely: Is leadership important or necessary for the Thai nation? Was Phra Ruang a good leader?

To answer the first question, we should turn to the history of the Thai nation and review some of its landmarks. One outstanding fact has been found to pervade the length and breadth of the history of this country, namely that whenever the Thai have had good leaders, there has been unity and progress in the land. Moreover, the country would be free from alien domination and control. Among periods illustrating this fact were the reigns of King Naresuan the Great, King Dhonburi and King Rama I, the founder of the present House of Chakri.

On the other hand disunity and strife would prevail whenever bad and inefficient leaders held the nation's reins. It was also found that defeats in wars with our neighbours occurred during such periods. King Fa of the Nan Chao Dynasty (circa A.D. 877) and King Mahindhradhiraj of the Ayudhya Dynasty (A.D. 1569) when the Kingdom of Ayudhya was utterly destroyed by the Burmese troops, are cases in point.

Regarding Phra Ruang's leadership, numerous instances found in the aforementioned play pinpoint his commendable leadership qualities. First and foremost was Phra Ruang's realization of the sad plight of his people under alien domination and his determination to do away with it. This unaviodably had its salubrious effect on the morale of the people.

Another leadership attribute shown by Phra Ruang was his mastery in the speaking art as manifest in his conversation with Nak Khum, the Khmer, who ultimately waived the punishment on the Thai as originally purported for their non-compliance of the

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water tribute obligation and undertook upon himself and his soldiers the task of carrying the water to their king themselves, instead of compelling the Thai to perform the task as was at first intended. Phra Ruang's leadership qualities were considered all the more remarkable in the light of the militarily helpless situation the Thai were in a situation in which the modern diplomacy of talking from the vantage of power would certainly find exception.

Phra Ruang's leadership was also reflected in his steadfast confidence in himself and in his people in the face of overwhelming odds. His creativeness was another quality that won him acclaim in the hearts of his compatriots as well as respect in the hearts of his foes.

He had also manifest on many occasions an indispensable characteristic for leadership, namely far-sightedness. More than anyone else, he had foreseen how the Khmer would react to his wit and creative ingenuity and how his compatriots would react should he himself be captured and put to death. His decisiveness and sacrifice were also recognised by his fellow-countrymen as laudable marks in his character.

There were also evident two factors which enhanced Phra Ruang's leadership. The first was his mother's selflessness and patriotism. It was she who had rallied the Thai people for an uprising to fight to the death for their independence. The second was his kindness and generosity—as evidenced in his treatment of the enemy who had been commissioned to capture or kill him. It turned out, as mentioned in the early part of this article, that the pursuer, instead of being able to capture or kill the pursued, was himself captured by the latter. On sparing his pursuers life and returning him to his homeland unharmed, Phra Ruang showed that characteristic of leadership which is rare even among great leaders.

To conclude, one fact seems to tower above all else in the attestation of Phra Ruang's leadership qualities and that is his ascendancy to kingship through the universal acclamation of his people.

*Summarized by Patom Jarnson*

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