

The Social History of Bangkok:

--The City Sanitation in the First Half of the Twentieth Century--

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Place of fieldwork: Bangkok, Thailand

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Research background

Most of researches about the history of Bangkok encompass merely on aspects of land use, city expansion, the focus of social history has been neglected. Though the topic of city environment does exist, the framework of modernization which was influenced by the Royal Family has been seemingly dominant. As a result, the actual livelihood of people and their activities have become overlooked. Based upon this existing research problem, this research aims to elucidate the social history of Bangkok by utilizing the primary source of documents in local language while concomitantly contemplating on the roles of city residents.

Research purpose and aim

This research focuses on the city sanitation problems which happened in Bangkok from the end of the nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century. The objective of this study is to clarify the characteristics of Bangkok as a city society in a historical perspective by investigating the comprehensive views from the administration as well as policies of the central government, the autonomous government and each activity of citizen per se. After the first half of the nineteenth century, however, the problems of sanitation, such as epidemic, garbage and sewage became deteriorated because of the influx of huge immigration from the Southern China. With regard to this problem, how did the city dwellers, including new emigrants, cope with this situation? Particularly, in what way were the self-governing organizations and resident groups formulated? This research attempts to scrutinize the actual state of this society based on these vital questions.

Results and achievements of fieldwork

Based on primary source of documents in local language, documents of Local Government Ministry, and documents of Ministry of Public works, problems of sanitation in Bangkok can be separated into two modes. One is the “policy of public health concerning environment” – how to effectively keep away

garbage and sewage, the other is “the policy of public health concerning human hygiene” – how to prevent people from epidemic, or how to carry out a good medical care to the public. Considering most of the research on the sanitation of Bangkok, it can be concluded that central government was the key actor to enhance and develop the sanitation system of Bangkok. However, according to the primary source of the documents, it can be interpreted that central government did not pay a serious attention to the public health policies.

Implications and impacts on future research

The expected contribution of this fieldwork is to recognize the reconsideration of the framework on modernization which was influenced by the royal family. Importantly, the investigation of social history of local area, in my view, is one of the significant methods that can shed the light on important roles of normal people involved in Thai history.

- 1) Satirical cartoon of a newspaper concerning problems of public health in Bangkok.



- 2) Photos of Cantonese people posted in a shrine of Kwangsue Hospital



3) The Tianfah Foundation Hospital was established in 1905 at the Chinese community of Bangkok.

