

Bangkok's Social History:

Modernization and the Various Accompanying Problems Related to "Publicness"

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Place of fieldwork: Bangkok, Thailand

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Research background

Most studies on Bangkok's history argue that the state's provision of services for city sanitation and public health that commenced at the end of the nineteenth century was part of the King-initiated modernization that was aimed to civilize the country. Several of these studies, however, ascribe the failed infrastructure and public health service provision between the end of the nineteenth century and 1932 not only to the shortage of investment capital but also to the paucity of knowledgeable human resources in regard to policy implementation and educated citizens. Thus far, no studies have touched upon the resolution or notion underlying the state's ruler in implementing the public utility services. Furthermore, no special consideration has been given to the unique characteristics of Bangkok-dwelling citizens, most of whom were migrant laborers. It is of note that all of the previous studies concur that the government in the late nineteenth century was resolved to develop the country for the citizens, and that the citizens of Bangkok embraced the government's hegemony. These two conditions justified the explanation under the framework of modernization.

Research purpose and aim

The main objective of this research is to understand the concept of "publicness" in terms of the modernization of the city society of Bangkok from the end of the nineteenth century to the pre-revolution period leading up to 1932. This research focuses on the state activities in two realms: city sanitation and public health. These state activities originated in the context of the rapid influx of citizens in Bangkok due to migrant laborers from the south of China and the British colonies. Accompanying this influx, problems with the environment and with public health arose in the city. This study emphasizes the state activities in practice instead of examining the concepts embedded in the policies. It also focuses on the reactions of Bangkok dwellers, who were predominantly migrant laborers: did they demand that the state provide basic services or did they gather to solve the problems of sanitation and basic public health? These queries may provide an understanding of how the idea of "publicness" was conceived by the ruler and the ruled in Bangkok.

During this course of fieldwork, data collection was principally focused on information regarding the provision of public health in Bangkok. In this manner, answers to two questions were sought: 1) how did the

government manage the public health services and 2) to what extent did the city dwellers rely on state-supplied public health services?

Results and achievements of fieldwork

On the basis of the research into primary resource documents, such as those of the Ministry of Local Government and the Ministry of Finance, it can be inferred that the government did not seriously provide fundamental public health services in Bangkok prior to 1932. Because the majority of the migrant laborers in Bangkok were from the south of China, it can be hypothesized that the government ignored the importance of providing basic health services in order to decelerate the death rate of adults and increase the survival rate of newborn babies, which would, in turn, augment the quantity of laborers in the country. The state-implemented public health services in Bangkok led to the assumption that the modernized notion of “citizens,” who were beneath the ruler, did not yet exist at that time, though it was a very rudimentary concept for providing services to the public.

Implications and impacts on future research

The expected contribution of this fieldwork is to bring about a reconsideration of the framework on modernization, which was influenced by the royal family. Investigation of the social history of the local area, in my view, is a very useful method that can be utilized to shed light on the important roles of the everyday people involved in Thai history.

- 1) Household trash can be found on the streets and sidewalks throughout Bangkok.



Date taken: 18 July 2010, Place: Lord Canal, Taken by Nipaporn Ratchatapattanakul

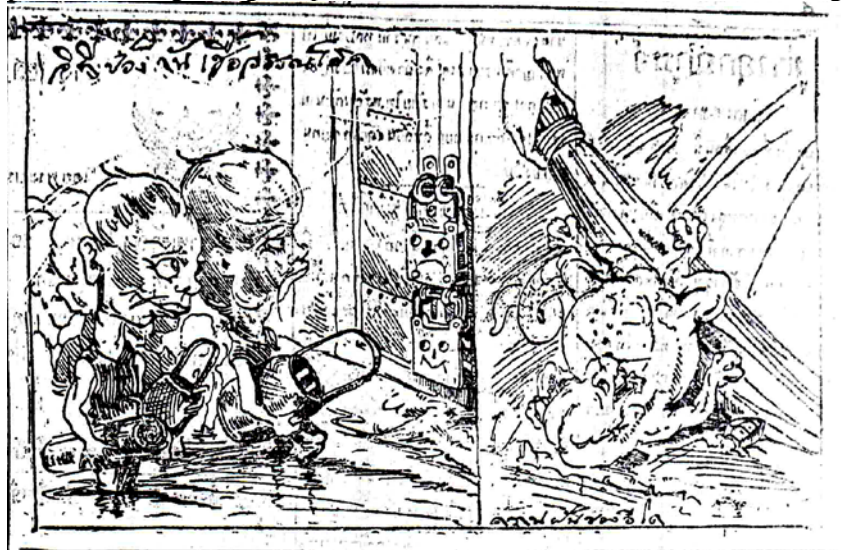
- 2) “Anti-dust hood” shop
Satirical newspaper cartoon regarding dust problems in Bangkok in the 1920s.



Date taken: 14 July 2010, Place: National Archives of Thailand
In the collection of the National Archives of Thailand

3) Tuberculosis control

Satirical newspaper cartoon regarding the problem of tuberculosis transmission in Bangkok in the 1920s.



Date taken: 14 July 2010, Place: National Archives of Thailand
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