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Motivations for the Siamese State's Interventions into Bang Chan: Mid-19th to the 20th Centuries

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Motivations for the Siamese State’s Interventions into Bang Chan: 

Mid-19th to the 20th Centuries

This study explores the relationships between a village in Siam, the Siamese government, and European influences through time. I became interested in the intersections between these three actors in a long series of readings, papers, and reflections on my way toward cultivating a thesis. I began with an exploration into swidden agriculture from a curiosity with different agrarian life ways. I read Lucien M. Hanks (1972), “Rice and Man”, and altered my research to focus on the role of the state in one agrarian/fishing hamlet, Bang Chan. I was curious about how people conceive of governance, and what structures, roles, and citizens are imagined and created by states. To answer some of these questions I read James C. Scott’s (1998) Seeing Like A State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed, that provided a few conceptual tools to deconstruct state agendas and motivations. In a prior paper I took Scott’s state simplification and legibility theories, discussed below, and analyzed these theories with respect to Lucien Hank’s description of Siamese governance. The present study is an extension of that work.

In this paper I explore what motivated the Siamese state to intervene into its populace throughout the 19th and into the 20th centuries, taking Bang Chan, Siam as my case study. I argue that the state was motivated to intervene into Bang Chan due to three factors. First, the state faced external, colonial pressures to modernize the country. Second, King Chulalongkorn

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1 Siam was the name of Thailand prior to 1939. A 1932 revolution ushered in new civilian and military leaders who displaced royalist rule. Part of their move to construct a new era and break from the royalist past was to rename the country (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 132). This paper uses Siam rather than Thailand for historical accuracy.
and his entourage were fond of many aspects of European modernity and sought to reorganize the government along the lines of Britain’s colonies. Finally, the state intervened into Bang Chan to make its populace legible and orderly for enhanced state capacities.

I borrow the concepts of state legibility making and modernist ideology from James Scott’s (1998) work to understand both colonial impositions on Siam and internal initiatives to intervene into Bang Chan. Scott provides a synopsis of modernist ideology pervasive in the minds and agendas of the 19th century colonial powers. Modernist ideology provided a vision and driving force both for colonial imposition on Siam as well as the state’s intervention into its populace.

Exploring Siamese state interventions and theories to comprehend what the Siamese state did and why adds to a body of knowledge about Western colonialism and its influences on the historical trajectory of non-Western places. A more general study of states allows for insight into lives within a nation. For instance, a study of state legibility would illuminate why states construct methods to settle people and discourage mobility without notifying the state apparatus. A study of states provides questions about the role of the state, and how life is structured, intervened into, and manipulated by central schemes.

The following section presents Scott’s concepts of state legibility and modernist ideology in further detail. I then discuss the background to the case study, colonial influences on Siam, the government’s internal reforms, the state’s interventions into Bang Chan, and legibility and order making. I conclude with a reflection on Scott’s model in the 19th century Siamese context.
Theoretical Background

This section presents James C. Scott’s (1998) concepts of modernist ideology and state legibility to begin to understand the British, French, and the Siamese monarchy’s motivations and impositions. Modernism originated out of 19th century Europe and provided the colonial powers and the Siamese monarchy with utopian visions of enhanced standards of living. Modernism promulgated a better life though, “continued linear progress, science and technological knowledge, the expansion of production, the rational design of social order, the growing satisfaction of human needs, and [...] an increasing control over nature (including human nature) commensurate with scientific understanding of natural laws” (Scott 1998: 89).

Modernist ideology posited that continued technological invention, and the intensification and application of science to all areas of human life could lead to a utopian existence. Technological progress could produce happiness, particularly measured through the satisfaction of material and service (e.g. healthcare and educational) desires (Scott 1998: 91).

Modernist ideology expanded the role of the state not only to secure the status and prominence of ruling elites, but to improve all members of society through science, technology, and rational design. The “modern” state sought to advance the general welfare of the populace; healthcare, education, working skills, productivity and habits, and extending average life times (Scott 1998: 91). Unlike states of the past, a more invasive state needs an orderly populace and greater knowledge about its population to thoroughly intervene into their affairs.

Modernist states seek to “reduce the chaotic, disorderly, constantly changing social reality beneath it to something more closely resembling the administrative grid of its observations” (Scott 1998: 82). States attempt to standardize and homogenize their populations to better understand them for easier top-down management. Officials can more readily
comprehend a static, known, homogenized populace than a dynamic and diverse one with many unknowns. The more the state knows about its populace, the more accurately and invasively it can intervene into it. For instance, if the state is unaware of a segment of the populace’s movements and migrations then the state cannot tax this group, the state will not know if the group will rebel, nor can the state harness these peoples’ labor. Uniform populaces with the fewest variables and change are easier to understand and manipulate (Scott 1998: 22).

Nineteenth century states went to great lengths and utilized many techniques to make their populations uniform and legible to confer progress and modernity. States employed techniques such as land deeds, censuses, birth certificates, and identification numbers to track and tax individuals. States tried to homogenize their populations by “break[ing] down their segmentation by imposing common languages, religions, currencies, and legal systems, as well as promoting the construction of connected systems of trade, transportation, and communication” (Scott 1998: 82). Whatever technique is used, states create mechanisms that produce information about their populations, and transform their social and natural landscapes to confer modernity and to better observe, control, manipulate the populace (Scott 1998: 22, 82).

Siam

[Map: Siam & its Neighbors (CIA World Factbook)]

This section provides a background to Siam, the history of the state, and its relations with others in which to situate the state’s association with the case study; Bang Chan. Siam is located between the neighboring states of Burma, Laos, Cambodia, and Malaysia. It
is south of China and east of India. Siam’s capital, Bangkok, and the state’s most densely settled area lie in the delta of the Chao Phraya river basin that opens to the Gulf of Siam. It is within this region that successive monarchies and the later centralized, state apparatus conducted their affairs.

The current capital arose after the destruction of the former one by Burmese invasions in the mid-18th century. After the Burmese invasion, Phaya Taksin emerged as the strongest of the remaining elite. With the aid of mostly Chinese nobles he became the preeminent governor in the Chao Phraya basin. His oversight and connections drew other scattered nobles and their peasants back into organized governance. As nobles regained their equilibrium, many became dissatisfied with the new ruler’s dubious heritage, untraditional style, his self-proclaimed elevation above the monkhood, and their displaced role in the new order with a new king and his network of alliances. The old nobility organized a coup in 1782, executed Taksin, and placed Thongduang, one of Taksin’s successful generals of old Mon lineage, on the throne. King Yotfa, Thongduang’s new title, relocated the capital to Bangkok and established the Chakri dynasty that remains to the present day (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 27).

Both rulers represent a significant break from past leaders. The Burmese invasion was accompanied by heightened militarization throughout Taksin (1767-1782) and Yotfa’s reigns (1782-1809). The two rulers conscripted significant armies and set about expanding the royalty’s territory and tributaries. Bangkok armies secured tributary status with regional rulers that were crushed under the Burmese attack, and expanded into Cambodia and Laos capturing thousands of people to repopulate the Chao Phraya basin (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 27, 278).

Taksin’s reign also began a revival and expansion of the market economy by encouraging Chinese migration. Chinese migrants boosted the economy through their expanding businesses,
the government's new taxes on businesses, and their wage labor for the market and government projects. By King Nangklao’s reign (1824-1851), Chinese trade proliferated in volume and variety incorporating greater sectors (agriculture, various manufacturing, and transportation) in export trade predominately with China (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 33, 278).

Throughout the 19th century and the reigns of Nangklao, Mongkut (1851-1868), and Chulalongkorn (1868-1910), the monarchy faced mounting external and internal problems. The British and French continually colonized all of Siam’s neighbors, encroached upon Siam’s tributaries and territory, and demanded social and economic modernization. Kings Mongkut and Chulalongkorn, and their royal and noble entourage, slowly conceded to the militarily superior colonial powers. Chulalongkorn set about implementing wide-ranging reforms and centralized governance in part to gain the respect of the colonial powers as a rising, civilized state, and in part from his belief in modernist ideology and growing internal problems (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 76).

As the British and French pressured the monarchy, the kings concurrently faced a disorderly kingdom without the structure to manage rising state demands and increasingly complex social and economic terrains. Throughout Mongkut and Chulalongkorn’s reigns, Bangkok’s tributaries were dangerous invitations for colonial expansion. The autonomous and semi-autonomous tributary states made their own deals with the British and French. Chulalongkorn saw the tributaries as inconsistent in state policy across the Siamese kingdom, and possible sources of friction that could legitimate colonization of the region if not all of Siam. Tributary status between the center and the periphery was no longer an appropriate mechanism of state organization in the new colonial context (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 49).
By the mid-19th century Chinese migration since Taksin's time created a massive, unassimilated, migrant population. The old government structure and its efforts to subdivide the heads of the migrant communities failed. Migrants did not form settled, organized communities with a leader that could be co-opted into the government elite. Further, migrants proved to be a potent, state-threatening force evident during massive migrant riots in the providences throughout the 1840s to 1870s (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 48).

The monarchies of the 19th century also faced a new and chaotic agrarian frontier. King Nangklao began extensive canal projects in the 1830s to facilitate troop movement from Bangkok to the state's borders. The canals drained swamplands and opened up new, unoccupied, and fertile lands for cultivation. With the expanding role of the market, slaves, corvée laborers, and indentured servants fled their old labor controls to occupy these open lands and sell produce to urban populations. The government's efforts to incorporate this labor through new taxation methods were frustrated by evasion and armed resistance (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 48).

Colonial Imposition and Siam's Accommodation to Modernizing Pressures

The following sections focus on the colonial pressures and internal modernization initiatives that motivated the state to intervene into Bang Chan. This part explores the external, colonial impositions on Siam that motivated King Chulalongkorn's state centralization agenda, which tied Bang Chan to the center to an unprecedented degree. The British and French sought to exploit the human and natural resources of their colonies, and expand into resource rich geographies not yet within their empires. The Siamese state did what it could to avoid being absolutely incorporated into the British or French colonial system. This entailed learning
European prejudices and conceptions of race, national identity, progress, and civilization, well enough to maintain Siam’s sovereignty by working within Europeans’ conceptual frameworks.

The state embarked upon a series of internal reforms that would make Siam look more “modern” by Western understanding. These internal reforms attempted to mitigate colonists’ drive to conquer “backwards”, “benighted” people, ostensibly to confer progress while exploiting land and labor (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 76). King Chulalongkorn’s desire to ward off colonization required that he learn Westerners’ notion of “modern”. He sent a delegation to Britain in 1884 to report what could preserve Siam’s sovereignty:

The danger to Siam, they argued [the Siamese delegation to Britain], arose from the west’s belief in its own mission to “bring progress and civilization so mankind everywhere is equally content”. A western power would justify seizing a country which failed to provide progress, justice, free trade, protection for foreign nationals – “in sum, the ability to govern and develop the country”. They advised: “to resolve this problem, Siam must be accepted and respected by the Western powers as a civilized nation” (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 76).

Many of the state-led interventions into Bang Chan can be traced back to colonial pressures to modernize Siam. In what follows, I present the contentious colonial context that led King Chulalongkorn and his ruling elite to adopt modernist reforms as the only route, rather than armed conflict, to maintain Siam’s independence.

By 1826 British-Indian troops had invaded and pushed back the Burmese, annexing much of Burma’s coastline (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 39). Siam’s ruling elite were initially pleased with the defeat of their old-time rival but became increasingly alarmed as British expansion approached Siam’s tributaries. In the 1820s the British clashed with Siamese troops who were dispatched to maintain a military presence along Siam’s western side. Multiple skirmishes culminated in the British demanding the Siamese elite to define Siam’s territorial boundaries (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 39). Previous monarchies were not concerned with
territory per se, but with control over people. In the past, the ruling elite extended Siamese influence by capturing, subordinating, or allying with the leaders of weaker states, not by laying claim to their space (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 42). However by force of arms and continued conflict, Siamese elites had to learn and adopt the British’s definition of rule over territory.

The British’s defeat of China in the 1840s Opium War, and the 1893 Paknam Incident were two major events that demonstrated colonialists’ military superiority, and the need to negotiate and accommodate their demands. China’s defeat astonished Siam’s ruling elite as China had been the preeminent state economically, politically, and militarily for over two centuries. China’s defeat demonstrated the military capacity of the British, and a potential outcome to hindering colonial interests; in this case to sell opium. Siam responded by negotiating a treaty with the British, the Bowring Treaty of 1855, in an attempt to appease the British and mitigate the British’s desire to colonize Siam. The treaty established free trade, annulled the monarchy’s monopoly on trading rights, gave British citizens extraterritorial rights, and set a general course to overhaul state organization and functions. The treaty undercut Siam’s principal source of revenue and the court’s ability to prosecute British citizens regardless of their crimes and lax punishment by British courts (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 45).

Siam experienced direct confrontation with the French in the 1890s when France annexed all of the lands south of the Chinese border and westwards to the Mekong River that included some of Siam’s tributary states. Siam’s ruling elite responded by enforcing its prior territorial claims. A skirmish between Siamese and French troops led to the death of a prominent French general. The French retaliated by sending two gunboats up the Chao Phraya River blocking water access to Bangkok and besieging the city. The temporary siege of Bangkok, called the Paknam Incident, resulted in a treaty that fixed Siam’s eastern boundaries at the Mekong River,
ceding present day Laos and parts of Cambodia to the French. The French extended extraterritorial rights to nearly anyone claiming French or Indochinese association, which made it difficult for the Siamese court to curb crime and tax evasion without confrontation with the French (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 59).

From the 1820s to the end of the 19th century, the British colonized Burma, slowly nibbled away Siam's sphere of influence, humbled China in the Opium War, and established exploitative economic and political rights in Siam. The French colonized Vietnam, proclaimed a protectorate over Cambodia and Laos up to the Mekong River, besieged Bangkok in the Paknam Incident, and established many economic and political rights for its motherland and colonial subjects (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 77). The British and French proved to be formidable enemies that could colonize Siam just as they had colonized all of Siam's neighbors who were themselves potent, old rivals. The threat of colonization coupled with changes in the ruling elite and their governing philosophies ushered in watershed changes, particularly centralization and state intervention in the name of progress. Bang Chan's relation to the Siamese state can be situated within these external and internal contexts and their changes. State centralization and intervention in order to bring Siam into the civilized, modern world was first pursued in earnest by King Chulalongkorn.

**Progress and Internal Colonization**

Much of the internal explanation for the state's motivation to intervene into Bang Chan can be traced to King Chulalongkorn's efforts to shape state policy, roles, and form in accordance with European models. The king admired certain aspects of modernist ideology that entailed social, scientific, and political advances characteristic of those historically developing
out of Europe (Scott 1998). European advisors assisted Chulalongkorn in creating a reform agenda that entailed:

centralizing authority through a civil service that would eventually reach the remotest hamlet in the hinterland. They [advisors] advocated a police system, judicial reform, public education, railroads, an impartial customs, and a host of other services. These additions to government would be paid for by taxes collected from all people and doled out in budgeted amounts by a central treasury (Hanks 1972: 111).

King Chulalongkorn set about implementing these reforms from the late 1860s to 1910. By the end of his reign he had refashioned the government into a bureaucratic apparatus better able to intervene into and control the people within Siam’s newly acquired territorial boundaries. Many of the interventions into Bang Chan throughout the late 19th century can be understood as part of Chulalongkorn’s internal colonization and centralization of state functions (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 53-54).

King Chulalongkorn attempted to end labor controls to allow slave and corvee labor to be allocated according to market principles. Siam faced labor shortages for rising industries. Freeing slaves allowed labor to fill the new business sector, and to appease colonial criticism of slavery. Chulalongkorn’s attempt to abolish slavery upon his accession to the thrown in 1868 was challenged by a segment of nobles whose economic interests relied on slave labor. In 1874 Chulalongkorn established the gradual abolition of slavery whereby hereditary slaves born after 1868 would gain their freedom upon age 21 (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 53-54).

Over the next few decades greater numbers of slaves slipped free of their formal bondage. Some left legally through gradual abolition or nobles who elected to release slaves early. Chulalongkorn extended new head taxes with his centralization scheme that made excess labor expensive for nobles who had to cover the tax for their slaves. Other slaves illegally fled to the
new agricultural frontier where they could supply growing urban centers and the export trade with produce (esp. rice) through the market (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 53-54).

In the 1870s Chulalongkorn created a small European trained and highly equipped army. The army was enough to begin to suppress significant sources of crime in urban centers and the agricultural frontier, and to supplant tributary lords for central control. Before Chulalongkorn’s accession to the thrown, Siam’s territory and populations where dispersed among seven regional lords who owed tribute to the monarchy. Tributary states and lords furthest from Bangkok had the most autonomy and organized their populations around local hereditary rule. No discrete geopolitical units existed at that time; provinces, districts, communes, our states, counties, and cities. Land was less of a concern than local lords’ spheres of influence and control over regional populations (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 53-54).

By 1874 the monarchy slowly began to centralize control beginning with the incorporation of the former Lanna (Chiang Mai) tributary. The monarchy sent Bangkok advisors to the tributary states backed by the newly founded army to pressure local leaders to adopt Bangkok-style reforms such as taxation, conscription, registration, and legal codes. Bangkok advisors gradually instituted reforms and diverted taxes toward the center. As local leaders died or retired, their heirs were displaced from power for a member of the royalty, effectively centralizing control. The resulting structure “established a pyramidal bureaucracy down to the local level” (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 54). The new organization closely resembled a British-Indian colonial model, which Chulalongkorn chose as the paradigm for progress.

In 1893 Chulalongkorn appointed his half-brother Damrong Rajanuphap to direct the newly established Ministry of the Interior. Damrong applied European principles of land mapping, borders, and geopolitical units to Siam’s territory, just as the colonial powers had
demanded Siam to define its territorial borders in the 1820s. Although Siam had national borders since the 1820s, its territory was not unified until the mid-1870s, and subdivided into geopolitical units only by the mid-1890s. Early state interventions into Bang Chan and areas like it were meant to reify the center’s novel notions of geopolitical units, backed by the force of law and arms (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 53-54).

Chulalongkorn concurrently centralized the justice system. All court cases were transferred from local ministries once held in the offices or houses of former lords into separate buildings especially created for bureaucratic functions. Provincial courts were established and networked into a judicial pyramid that mirrored its political counterpart. In 1899 Chulalongkorn’s centralization agenda was formalized into legislation that signified the break from past tributary state organization to a central, civil service system overwhelmingly staffed with royal appointees (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 52-66).

**Bang Chan**

[Map: Central Siam - Bangkok & Bang Chan (Hanks 1972: 6)]

Interventions into Bang Chan were part of Chulalongkorn’s centralization process to modernize Siam. State interventions into Bang
Stein

Chan are specific examples of what centralization meant in one place. Along with external colonial pressures, and internal reforms, the state’s interventions into Bang Chan were motivated by a desire to increase the state’s knowledge and control of its territories. Some state interventions, such as the creation of the district office, officials, their records, and police allowed the state to enhance the effectiveness of other interventions such as taxation, conscription, and aid by creating order and better understanding its diverse populace.

Background

This part provides a background to Bang Chan, and connects colonial impositions, state modernization and centralization, and state legibility making to the case study. Until Bang Chan the 1950s was a small commune located about 22 miles northeast of Bangkok, Siam (Hanks 1972: 14). Although Bang Chan has been incorporated into an expanding Bangkok, it had modest, remote beginnings. The area was uninhabited and inaccessible until about the 1840s. Vietnamese expansion into Laos and Cambodia in the early 19th century threatened the tributary status of King Nangklao’s eastern alliances. Nangklao hired Chinese laborers to dig the Saen Saeb Canal to connect Bangkok to the Bang Pakhong River to facilitate troop movement and secure the eastern city-states. The Saen Saeb was completed in the mid-1840s and made accessible new, fertile lands for habitation (Hanks 1972: 73).

The first inhabitants of Bang Chan were Malay prisoners of war. King Nangklao demonstrated his appreciation for the Bunnags’ loyalty and military campaigns against Malay sultans by giving the noble family a tract of land along the Saeb Saen Canal and Malay prisoners of war. The Bunnags populated the estate with the Malay prisoners. Two other groups settled along a rivulet just off the Saen Saeb. In the 1850s King Mongkut relocated a number of Lao
prisoners of war from Bangkok to Bang Chan. Also at this time, Chaem, a Chinese-Siamese migrant and his close relatives, spouse, and children founded a hamlet in the area. Despite their close proximity, the three settlements remained as autonomous, distinct, and mostly self-reliant communities until increased market orientation in the latter half of the 1800s (Hanks 1972: 73-80, Sharp & Hanks 1978: 39).

All three groups were slash and burn rice farmers, and fished. Of the three, the Chinese-Siamese fishermen and rice farmers had been the most dependent on the market for wares and repairs since Bang Chan’s founding, as they had the smallest labor pool to draw upon. Self-sufficiency receded as the market increasingly became a primary institution for all three groups over time. Cash flows and foreign exchange increased with the 1855 Bowring Treaty, and similar treaties with other European powers. These treaties opened up Siam to favorable European trade conditions by repealing tariffs and the monarchy’s trade monopoly (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 43, Sharp & Hanks 1978: 64).

By 1874 King Chulalongkorn had initiated a number of policy reforms aimed at ‘progressing’ Siam (see above), one of which was the gradual abolition of slavery. From 1885 to 1910, Bang Chan experienced a rapid influx of migrants into and through Bang Chan in part due to Chulalongkorn’s abolition policies as well as continual canal projects that created an unsettled agricultural frontier. Although most migrants moved through Bang Chan some stayed and Bang Chan’s peasant population swelled (Sharp & Hanks 1978: 88).

It was at this time that a new relatively wealthy family migrated to Bang Chan. The Khlaung Tej came from an area along the Chao Phraya River south of the palace. The city was expanding and land prices were increasing. Land deeds did not yet exist and those without strong connections to the court were often dispossessed of their lands. The Tej were one such family.
They moved to Bang Chan to take up vacant land upon negotiation with some higher court
member. The verbal agreement and connection to the administrator provided the family with
more secure claims to avoid being displaced in the future (Hanks 1972: 94).

From the mid-19th century onwards, Mongkut and later Chulalongkorn favored an
economic self-sufficiency policy, required taxes to be paid in cash, rolled back corvee
obligations, and increased the costs of commodities in an effort to transform a lazy peasant
populace into a hard working, productive, modern, export-oriented citizenry (Sharp & Hanks
1978: 82). Although Bang Chan mostly remained outside the scope of the central government
and its tax collectors until the mid-1890s, this economic policy sent greater numbers of people
through Bang Chan in search of land, and to escape the government's reach; taxation and corvee
(Sharp & Hanks 1978: 88).

A few people rose to prominence in Bang Chan throughout the end of the 19th century.
Chyn was a recent arrival who came with a reputation for toughness and violence. Bang Chan
was likely his third relocation after causing trouble in his previous two residences. Chyn,
however, applied his reputation and swordsmanship toward fending off thieves, toughs, and tax
collectors in Bang Chan. In time he and his posse became the de facto police and authority in the
hamlet. He provided an umbrella of protection and others recognized his authoritative role by
serving him as a man of honor at community events. His authority, however, rested as much on
threat as protection, and was relatively limited. In 1898 a new leader rose to prominence backed
by the center's slowly expanding officialdom (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 83, Sharp & Hanks
State Interventions

This section explores state interventions and schemes into Bang Chan as local examples of Chulalongkorn’s modernization agenda; either political through centralization, or scientific and social. Bang Chan’s first direct connection to the government occurred with the nomination of Chaem’s son, Phlym, to the ranks of officialdom in 1896. Phlym became Bang Chan’s first headman accountable to the newly established district some 3 km away. Phlym and the new district office represent the slow reification of the center’s schemes. The creation of the commune headman position and the new district office occurred just three years after Chulalongkorn created the Ministry of the Interior in 1893 to reorganize Siam’s social and geographical landscapes (see above and the following section on legibility) (Sharp & Hanks 1978: 112).

Phlym adopted a number of responsibilities with his new official appointment. One of Phlym’s duties, and perhaps his primary function, was to collect taxes. Phlym’s tax collection dovetailed into Chulalongkorn’s centralization agenda as the state’s new organization and monetary taxation increased the royal elites and nobles’ discretionary income in unparalleled and prodigious ways. New taxation went hand-in-hand with centralization down to the local level. As Chulalongkorn slowly incorporated the tributary states into the Ministry of the Interior, he concurrently imposed central taxes on the local populations, funneled into the Finance Office (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 52-53).

If taxation was Phlym’s primary objective, enforcing order, and the payment of taxes, was a close second. The establishment of officials as the local police, and the later creation of a separate police force in 1904, was one response to an unruly agrarian frontier that evaded taxes and threatened tax collectors. In Bang Chan, Chyn was one such individual, whose posse warded
off collectors until Phlym undercut his prominence with greater wealth for creating network alliances, and his dual role as tax collector and local authority (Sharp & Hanks 1978: 107-109). Phlym was one example of centralization’s dual character; extending taxation into the agrarian frontier as well as creating order through new officials and state force.

In the 1890s King Chulalongkorn granted a Siamese-German firm the task of opening up vast tracts of land for cultivation by digging canals to allow standing water to escape eventually to the sea. By 1902 the canals were complete and affluent elites bought up much of this land and allowed tenants, some from Bang Chan, to settle these lands. Within a year or two the canals drained so much water that the water level was too low to cultivate. The government responded to this crisis by initiating a second water project, which by 1908 had established three water gates that could hold the water level at the optimum level, and for the right duration (Hanks 1972: 114, Sharp & Hanks 1978: 126).

These water control interventions into Bang Chan and the surrounding regions can be understood as a state modernizing project. One of the hallmarks of modernist ideology is the reconfiguration of the environment through the application of science and technology for enhanced living standards. This state project demonstrates the notion of progress through the successful application of technology, as the newly controlled environment did benefit many in Bang Chan with greater crop security and easier transportation to nearby canals (Sharp & Hanks 1978: 126). It is feasible to say this intervention was motivated, at least in part, by the state’s desire to progress this region through its extended state role.

Three other significant state interventions occurred from the early 1900s into the 1930s that demonstrate the state’s expanded role motivated by modernist ideology. In 1901 Bang Chan was incorporated into state organized education. One priest-teacher was placed in Bang Chan by
an ambitious director responsible for implementing formal education in the greater Bangkok region (Sharp & Hanks 1978: 128). By 1932 the district officer and his educational assistant announced plans to establish a government school that was completed in 1933. Attendance was not mandatory until the mid-1930s when head teachers were granted the capacity to fine parents for absent children (Sharp & Hanks 1978: 151). A state issued, standard curriculum was also adopted in Bang Chan at about this time (Sharp & Hanks 1978: 286).

In 1917 the agricultural, Chao Praya delta region flooded drowning many farmers’ buffalo, crops, and inducing an influenza epidemic. The government responded by providing high ground places for buffalo, tending to diseased animals, instructing people in preventing disease, creating employment for the destitute, and purchasing grain for distribution to the destitute as food and for farmers without seed. Farmers began anew following the flood but crops generally failed in a subsequent drought season. The government responded by regulating the price of rice to mitigate mass immiseration (Sharp & Hanks 1978: 133).

Only a few years passed before the depression crippled global rice prices. The government negotiated with other countries in an attempt to absorb Siam’s rice supply. The Department of Agriculture set out to find the most productive rice varieties, and Bang Chan farmers sent their best samples to the government. The government soon directed its district officers and local headmen to ensure only good varieties were cultivated. To a degree, the government became both a macro and micro-manager for Siam’s rice supply (Sharp & Hanks 1978: 152).

These state interventions exemplify the expanded role of the state that fits with modernist ideology. The state took the populace’s welfare as an end in itself. State education provides Bang Chan residents with socioeconomic mobility in an expanded market economy and the state’s
civil service system (Sharp & Hanks 1978: 154-155). Water control, flood relief, and the state’s assistance with agriculture create safety nets unique to the modern state.

State Legibility

This section analyses the state’s interventions into Bang Chan as motivated to create order and legibility for enhanced state capacities. Part of the state’s motivation to intervene into Bang Chan was to create order and systems to make governing easier and more effective by organizing the social and natural terrain in ways that lent itself to top-down governance. Scott (1998) suggests that states are interested in refashioning their lands and populations in ways that make it easier for central planners to intervene into, manipulate, control, or simply understand them. Three of the state’s interventions into Bang Chan can be understood as motivated to create an orderly and legible social landscape for easier state management: the creation of commune headmen and regional districts as local extensions of Chulalongkorn’s centralization agenda, the creation of land titles matched to taxpayers, and a national police to enforce the state’s schemes and order social life.

The creation of a local commune headman in Bang Chan and a new district office in Minburi, created order, structure, and knowledge about the people residing in places previously out of the government’s reach. Under British colonial pressure, ruling elite during King Mongkut’s reign reluctantly adopted the colonial concept of borders and control over territory. The concept of a bounded political state was not lost on King Chulalongkorn, however, as his centralization scheme set about creating many, smaller, territorial political units out of Siam’s newly defined space (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 39). He imposed a bureaucratic grid that turned previously undifferentiated landscapes into relatively neat, hierarchical scales with their
associated bounded spaces; provinces, districts, communes, and their personnel. The new
ordered, and sub-ordered social and natural landscape allowed greater intervention than before,
and direct state presence for the first time in Bang Chan (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 54,
Sharp & Hanks 1978: 126). The state embarked upon creating an orderly social/natural terrain
both for its own sake – to create order as a modernist value – in addition to greater control,
manipulation, and understanding of the human and natural resources available to the government.
Both land titles and police furthered these goals.

Around the early 1900s Phlym locally implemented a new government land title scheme
in an attempt to abate raising land tension claims (Hanks 1972: 114). The government introduced
a series of land schemes to maintain order and oversight throughout the expanding agricultural
frontier. Land claims were at first backed by land tax receipts, but failed when multiple litigants
could produce receipts for the same lands. The government revised the system to incorporate
land descriptions into tax receipts, but this proved unsuccessful when multiple receipts described
the same land. By the early 1900s the government adopted the occidental solution of land
mapping and issuing title deeds based on geographical surveys and coordinates (Hanks 1972:
114).

The state’s land title scheme can be understood as the government’s attempt to make
Bang Chan legible for greater central control or to enhance the state’s ability to intervene. This
intervention made Bang Chan more legible by taking verbal claims and systematizing, or
standardizing them into written, measured plots tied to a given taxpayer. When Chulalongkorn
enacted gradual abolition and opened up new lands with canal projects, settlers fled to the lands
to claim them. No system was in place to avoid multiple claims to the same land, and district
courts were too overwhelmed to hash out what lands belonged to which claimant (Sharp &
The state faced an illegible social landscape with lands conceivably owned by many people. The state borrowed the Western land mapping/plotting method to make sense out of the confusion and create a more orderly social scene.

At some point the judiciary obviated prior preemption claims to make room for the new system. The system made order from apparent chaos which some Bang Chan residents welcomed, "Bang Chan clients were also pleased with the new system of recorded land deeds, since it helped reduce friction between neighbors: 'Once I had an argument with my neighbor. She was plowing in my land. We sent for Kamnan Phlym. He settled it by putting up land markers. He knew because of the title deed showing where the boundary lay'" (Sharp & Hanks 1978: 129). Title deeds mapped the social landscape as much as they specified geographical coordinates. This novel state intervention also made tax collection easier. District officers theoretically could look at the deeds or a designated geographical area, and know who lived there and who was responsible for paying taxes. Tax collecting became more effective with this state legibility project, in addition to just settling overlapping land claims.

The state's desire to make the social landscape ordered and legible for more effective—and invasive—governance led to the establishment of a national police force. By the 1850s Bangkok elites began to worry about increasing crime, disobedience, and disorder. Crime, especially theft, increased in rural areas of the agricultural frontier. Criminals comprised a varied bunch; some were peasants suffering a failed crop or another misfortune; some organized and trafficked in opium, liquor, gambling venues, or stolen cattle; others were local toughs. As hamlets formed in the frontier, local toughs emerged as defenders of the hamlets from bandits, moneylenders, and tax collectors alike; see Chyn above (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 48, 83). The Siamese government became increasingly alarmed about its disorderly kingdom, especially
when their efforts to collect taxes were thwarted or their tax collectors robbed. The creation of
commune headmen and later national conscription, 1904, into the military and police can be
understood as the state’s attempt to suppress crime and promote order. Whereas many of the
state’s interventions were ways to promote progress only, these three interventions also laid the
foundation for enhanced state capacities by making the social/natural spheres both legible and
orderly for top-down management.

**Conclusion**

This study explored the Siamese state’s motivations to intervene into Bang Chan from the
19th to 20th centuries. I proposed three overarching motivations for state intervention: colonial
pressure to modernize Siam, internal modernization and centralization, and the state’s desire to
create orderly and legible social and natural terrains for enhanced state capacities. This study
used James Scott’s (1998) analysis of modernist states. Although his analysis generally the
Siamese state’s motivations fairly accurately, there were disconnects and idiosyncrasies between
his models and the development of the state and its interventions into Bang Chan. For instance,
although modernist ideology promulgated a bureaucratic, functionally ordered government
structure, Siamese state administrators maintained patron/client relations veiled by an outward
appearance of bureaucracy and functional governance (see Hanks 1966). Likewise there were
inconsistencies in the application and scope of the government’s mandates and its actual
implementation on-the-ground; for instance, a 1913 edict banning firearms, drugs, and gambling
that was generally ignored in Bang Chan (see Sharp & Hanks 1978: 127, 130). Scott’s model, as
a model, glosses over particularities. A later study could explore in depth how the Siamese state
deviates from Scott’s (1998) models, and if those deviations warrant a revision of the models.
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