Prologue

Thailand's unique role in the history of Japan's World-War-II occupation of Southeast Asia reflected the fact that, prior to the war, it was the only independent state in a region dominated by European colonial powers. It had became the object of rivalry between Great Britain, the chief defender of the status quo, and an expansive Japan in the 1930s. This competition ended when Japan moved troops into Thailand on 8 December 1941 and contracted an alliance with the government of Field Marshal Phibun Songkhram. Subsequently, the three chief allies fighting against Japan – Britain, the USA, and China – all developed schemes to counter the Japanese presence and promote their own influence in Bangkok after the war. In order to put these events in context, it is necessary to look briefly at the prewar history of Thailand's internal politics and foreign relations.

From 1782 until 1932, the kings of the Chakri Dynasty ruled Thailand, then known as Siam, as absolute monarchs. Their accommodationist diplomacy, favorable geography, and a measure of good luck enabled Siam to survive the high age of European imperialism somewhat diminished in size, but with its independence relatively intact. The revered king who presided over most of this critical period, Chulalongkorn (Rama V, r. 1868–1910), had implemented a program of reforms that modernized the administrative structure, strengthened Bangkok's control over the provinces, and greatly increased the dominance of the royal family at the expense of the once-influential court nobles and regional princes.[1]

The two less capable sons who succeeded King Chulalongkorn failed to maintain positive momentum, however, and in 1932 a cabal of dissatisfied civilian and military officials, calling their faction the People's Party and themselves Promoters, staged a well-planned *coup d'état*. They

[1] David Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History* (New Haven, CT, 1984) is the standard general history of Thailand. For different perspectives on Thailand in the late nineteenth century see B. J. Terweil, *A History of Modern Thailand* (St. Lucia, Queensland, 1983) and Thongchai Winichaikul, *Siam Mapped* (Honolulu, 1994).

convinced King Prajadhipok (Rama VII, r. 1925–35) to sanction a constitution providing for a partly appointed, partly elected national assembly. The general population, from the largely illiterate peasants to the residents of Bangkok, played no significant part in the change of regime, although it is often called a "revolution."[2]

Efforts to reconcile the more moderate royalists and the Promoters soon broke down when the intellectual leader of the People's Party, the young French-educated lawyer Pridi Phanomyong (Banomyong), also known by his title Luang Pradit Manutham, put forth a plan to nationalize the economy. When a conservative backlash gained momentum, reform-minded Promoters launched a second successful *coup* in June 1933.

A royalist counter-rebellion in October 1933 failed, dooming the already troubled relations between the Promoters and King Prajadhipok. In 1934 the monarch departed for England, ostensibly for medical treatment. When he abdicated the throne the following year, the Promoters replaced him with his young nephew, Ananda Mahidol. The new figurehead king did not return to Bangkok, instead remaining in school in Switzerland.

These developments irrevocably embittered most royalists against the new regime and stripped the Promoters of the mantle of legitimacy provided by the king's initial acceptance of the new constitutional order. Although maintaining a facade of unity, the Promoters increasingly split into two main factions: one centered on Pridi, the leading civilian figure and the chief intellectual force of the ruling group; the other on the rising star of the army, Phibun Songkhram, the military hero of the struggles of 1933. The navy became the wild card in the political deck, but initially the admirals supported Phibun, primarily because he greatly increased defense spending.

Buoyed by his strong backing in the military, the handsome and charming Phibun emerged as the nation's premier in 1938. Buoyed by the international political trends of the "fascist era," the aspiring dictator cracked down on his political enemies, increasing the number of political prisoners. He also formally changed the country's name to Thailand in 1939, a shift that signalled his interest in recovering "lost territories" populated by ethnically related peoples. Although Pridi continued to hold the finance portfolio in Phibun's cabinet, he showed increasing dismay over the success of his rival in consolidating his personal power.

[2] Judith A. Stowe, *Siam Becomes Thailand* (Honolulu, 1991) provides a good overview of the political events of the 1930s. Also see Thawatt Mokrapong, *History of the Thai Revolution* (Bangkok, 1972); Benjamin A. Batson, *The End of the Absolute Monarchy in Siam* (Singapore, 1984); and Kenneth P. Landon, *Siam in Transition* (Chicago, 1939, reprinted New York, 1968).

In international relations, among the three chief allies that opposed Japan in World War II, nearby China naturally had the longest record of involvement with Siam. Natives of southern coastal China had for centuries traded with and emigrated to this tributary state of China-based empires, often settling down and marrying locally. These overseas Chinese established a flourishing trade, enriching themselves and the Thai kings who controlled and shared in the wealth produced by this foreign commerce. The close links between Chinese traders and the Thai court led to mixed marriages even at high levels, and successful Chinese often attained important political appointments. Over time, Chinese immigrants also came to dominate Siam's internal trade.[3]

The flow of Chinese into Siam increased during the nineteenth century, a chaotic time in southern China. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Chinese women began immigrating in significant numbers, changing the previous pattern of Chinese inter-marriage and cultural assimilation. As modern nationalist sentiment rose among the overseas Chinese, Thai leaders began to worry about the loyalty of this growing, economically powerful, and increasingly culturally distinct minority. British-educated King Vajiravudh (Rama VI, r. 1910–25) famously expressed these fears in an article, written under a pseudonym, that described the Chinese as the "Jews of the East."[4]

The Promoters shared such concerns about a potential Chinese fifth column. To counter the perceived danger, the leaders of the post-1932 regime, many of them of at least partial Chinese ancestry themselves, passed legislation aimed at pushing Chinese residents toward assimilation and Thai citizenship. The government also took an increasingly hard line against frequent anti-Japanese boycotts that complicated Bangkok's relations with Tokyo and, like previous governments, avoided formal diplomatic relations with the Republic of China. The latter stance reflected concern that Chinese diplomatic representatives would inevitably involve themselves in domestic political matters because resident Chinese – even those born abroad – were still considered Chinese citizens. Such attitudes and actions naturally displeased Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese Nationalist government, but, weakened by its struggle against the Japanese, it had little ability to exert effective pressure.[5]

[3] The classic work on this subject is G. William Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand* (Ithaca, NY, 1957).

[4] On the "Jews of the East" article and its context, see Walter F. Vella, *Chaiyo! King Vajiravudh and the Development of Thai Nationalism* (Honolulu, 1978), 186–96.

[5] Recent articles on the role of Chinese residents in Thailand before and during World War II include E. Bruce Reynolds, "'International Orphans' – The Chinese in Thailand during World War II," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 28 (September 1997): 365–88

Great Britain had taken full advantage of China's nineteenth-century decline, profiting mightily from the opium trade through Southeast Asia from British-controlled India. The British ultimately conquered Burma, Siam's western neighbor and most troublesome rival, and took charge of the Malay states to the south. French expansion into Indochina completed the colonial encirclement of Siam. After French gunboat diplomacy forced Bangkok's relinguishment of its claims to the Lao states in 1893, however, the two European colonial powers agreed to preserve the heartland of Siam as a buffer state between their respective territories.

Caught, as one king of Siam put it, "between the tiger and the crocodile," Siam gave first priority to the maintenance of friendly relations with the British, its most powerful neighbor, an approach that had both economic and political consequences. In the economic realm, British companies gained forestry and mining concessions and came to dominate Siam's foreign trade. Siam became a vital rice bowl for British Malaya, an area increasingly dependent on food imports, as large numbers of Chinese and Indian laborers migrated there to work in the tin mines and rubber plantations. Politically, influential British ministers ensured that their countrymen filled the most slots in Siam's corps of well-paid foreign advisors. Most Thai princes went to England for their education, including the last two absolute monarchs, as well as many ministers and other high-ranking officials.

The 1932 *coup* posed the first of two challenges to the British position in the decade leading up to World War II. Although the British could only regret the overthrow of a regime run by anglophile princes, they made no active effort to reverse the situation, choosing instead a policy aimed at allaying the suspicions of the Promoters. The old Siam hand Sir Josiah Crosby had considerable success in mending fences during his seven-year stint (1934–41) as British minister. However, he found it increasingly difficult to cope with the second challenge, posed by the Japanese. After Tokyo abandoned the gold standard in 1931 an influx of low-priced Japanese goods threatened British trade dominance. More dangerously, Japan abandoned the League of Nations in 1933 and embarked on an aggressive foreign policy that posed a security problem for which the over-stretched British had no effective answer.[6]

and "Failed Endeavors: Chinese Efforts to Gain Political Influence in Thailand during World War II," *Intelligence and National Security* 16 (Winter 2001): 175–204. Also, Eiji Murashima, "The Thai-Japanese Alliance and the Chinese of Thailand," in Paul Kratoska, ed., *Southeast Asian Minorities in the Wartime Japanese Empire* (New York, 2002), 192–222.

[6] See Josiah Crosby, *Siam: The Crossroads* (London, 1945); Richard J. Aldrich, *The Key to the South* (Kuala Lumpur, 1993); and Nicholas Tarling, "King Prajadhipok and the Apple Cart," *The Journal of the Siam Society* 64 (July 1976): 1–38.

In contrast to the longstanding Chinese and British interests in Siam, the United States played a minor role prior to World War II. Although friendly bilateral relations had existed for a century, neither nation had loomed particularly large in the other's calculations. In 1833, when diplomatic contact began, American ships frequently passed through Southeast Asia *en route* to the China coast, but this changed when the USA gained a foothold on the Pacific Ocean during the Mexican War. Thus, except for a substantial Protestant missionary presence, the USA had a low profile and minimal interests in Siam during the second half of the nineteenth century.

The lack of a tangible American stake in Siam at a time of waxing US power inspired the Thai to hire a series of Americans as foreign policy advisors from 1902. Their work, particularly the 1920s efforts by Woodrow Wilson's son-in-law, Francis B. Sayre, to renegotiate Siam's unequal treaties with Western nations, generated considerable goodwill. Still, the bilateral relationship remained of minor importance to Washington. That American diplomats often viewed assignment to Bangkok as a form of exile is evidenced by an off-the-cuff threat once issued by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Angered by leaks to the press, Roosevelt warned the State Department that if there were any more, "everyone down the line will be sent to Siam!"[7]

The insatiable appetite of the automobile industry for rubber, however, had made the Southeast Asian region an important source of raw materials for American industry in the early decades of the twentieth century. Siam produced some rubber, but remained a minor trading partner. In 1938, US imports totaled approximately $97 million (primarily rubber and tin) from British Malaya, $89 million from America's Philippine colony, $49 million from the Netherlands East Indies, and $7.2 million from French Indochina. Imports from Siam, in contrast, amounted to only $200,000, less than one-third of one percent of that nation's total exports. But not only did the USA buy little from Siam, its sales there amounted to only $2.7 million, a mere 4.1 percent of Siam's imports. This compares to $90 million in US sales to the Philippines, $33 million to the Netherlands East Indies, and $9.8 million to British Malaya. Similarly, American foreign investment – which by 1940 totaled $91 million in the Philippines, $71 million in the Netherlands East Indies, and $21 million in British Malaya – remained negligible in Siam.[8]

[7] Quoted in Benjamin Welles, *Summner Welles: FDR's Global Strategist* (New York, 1997), 200. The Japanese, too, had long viewed Bangkok as a backwater and diplomatic "dumping ground." See: E. Bruce Reynolds, *Thailand and Japan's Southern Advance, 1940–1945* (New York, 1994), 7.

[8] Gary Hess, *The United States' Emergence as a Southeast Asian Power, 1940–1950* (New York, 1987), 12–13, 15.

The importance of Southeast Asian resources attracted the attention of the US Council on Foreign Relations when it launched its War and Peace Studies Project in 1939. In evaluating the self-sufficiency of the world's regions, the project's Economic and Financial Group judged Germany's continental position as more self-sufficient than that of the Western hemisphere alone, a situation that made American access to another region vital. Integration with the Pacific area would strengthen the US position, but its advantages could best be maximized through a "grand area" of trade encompassing the British Empire. This study, which was passed on to the State Department, encouraged aid to Great Britain in its war with Germany, supported American rearmament, and encouraged moves to check the Japanese from blocking access to Southeast Asian resources.[9] The Roosevelt Administration ultimately acted in all three areas, but the stringent 1941 sanctions imposed in response to the move of Japanese troops into Southern French Indochina hastened the outbreak of war in the Pacific, rather than deterring it as Washington had hoped.

Despite raw materials needs for the concerted build-up of American military power, maneuvers to keep the oil-rich Netherlands East Indies out of Japanese hands, and efforts to shore up the British strategic presence in the Malay Peninsula, economic relations with Thailand were troubled in the period leading up to the Pearl Harbor attack. Nationalistic governmental restrictions led the Standard Vacuum Oil Company to abandon the Thai market in 1939 and the British-American Tobacco Company followed suit in 1941.[10] This left the International Engineering Company (primarily a sales outlet for American manufacturers), a movie distributorship, a Singer Sewing Machine Company outlet, and a typewriter company run by a scion of an old-line missionary family as the only American firms in Bangkok. Of the seventy-two American citizens resident in Bangkok at the beginning of September 1941, more than half were from missionary families, employees of mission-related educational organizations, or staff members of the US Legation. Several others were wives of foreign nationals.[11]

The long-cordial diplomatic relations between Washington and Bangkok also soured in the months before Pearl Harbor when Thai Premier Phibun took advantage of France's defeat at German hands to try to reclaim "lost territories" from French Indochina. American officials viewed Phibun's saber-rattling as a threat to the Asian status quo, so in

[9] Laurence H. Shoup and William Minter, *Imperial Brain Trust* (New York, 1977), 118–131 and Jonathan Marshall, *To Have and Have Not* (Berkeley, 1995), 28–32.
[10] On the oil company pullout, see: Stowe, *Siam Becomes Thailand*, 124–25.
[11] "List of American and Philippine Citizens Residing in Bangkok," 2 September 1941 in papers held by Willys R. Peck's daughter, Damaris Peck Reynolds, Corvallis, OR.

November 1940 they abruptly halted the delivery of warplanes purchased by the Thai government in the USA.

The move had little practical effect beyond creating ill will that redounded to the benefit of the Japanese. Having secretly promised to allow Japanese troops passage through southern Thailand in the event of an attack on British Malaya in return for Japan's support of Thai territorial demands against the French, Phibun launched an invasion of French territory in January 1941. When the Thai navy suffered a defeat at the hands of the French in mid-January, Phibun appealed for Japanese intervention. After protracted peace negotiations in Tokyo, the Japanese pressured the French into surrendering two tracts of land on the west bank of the Mekong River in Laos and two provinces in western Cambodia.

During the border conflict, American Minister Hugh G. Grant alienated both the Thai and his British counterpart Crosby by rigidly opposing Bangkok's actions. In contrast, Crosby, with the security of Malaya and Singapore in mind, desperately sought to maintain friendly relations to counter Japanese influence. Grant denounced Crosby's "appeasement" policy as undermining Washington's commitment to the status quo. In Washington, however, support for Britain solidified during Grant's one-year stay in Thailand. Thus, despite the Minister's negative reporting, Washington eventually decided to follow the British lead in regard to Thailand. This left Grant out on a limb that his superiors sawed off in August 1941. They sent veteran China diplomat Willys R. Peck to replace him.

With a portion of the "lost territories" in hand, Phibun proved receptive to Peck's moves to improve relations. After tilting strongly toward Japan during the border quarrel with the French, he now professed strict neutrality and encouraged a strong Anglo-American stance to deter Japan's further advance. Peck recommended American military assistance to encourage Thai resistance to Japanese pressure. Weapons were in short supply because of the pressing needs of the British and American military services, however, and skeptics worried that any arms sent to Bangkok would fall into Japanese hands.

As it became apparent he would not get effective protection from the British and Americans, Phibun turned back to bargain with the Japanese. Aware that they were preparing to move, he suggested that the Thai army would not oppose landings in the south if the Japanese kept their forces away from the Thai capital. Control of central Thailand and the railway linking Bangkok to Malaya were key elements in the Japanese plans, however, so no such concession could be made.[12]

[12] On Thai relations with Japan and the events of this period, see Reynolds, *Thailand and Japan's Southern Advance*.

On the eve of the anticipated offensive, Phibun disappeared, leaving the Japanese to deal with a cabinet that refused to make a decision in his absence. Thus their forces encountered piecemeal opposition from the Thai army and police when their troops began landing in peninsular Thailand a few hours before the attack on Pearl Harbor. After dawn on 8 December, Phibun returned to Bangkok and granted the Japanese free passage. These maneuvers put Phibun in a position to claim that he had kept his pledge to defend Thai neutrality, but had bowed to overwhelming force. According to Thai government figures, 170 Thai soldiers and policemen died in the brief fighting, along with fifty-four civilians. In addition, 130 uniformed personnel and three civilians sustained wounds.[13]

In the days that followed, Japanese pressures aimed at effecting a military alliance increased, and Phibun realized that Japanese forces would not merely pass through Thailand as he had hoped. Already the Japanese had produced impressive results at Pearl Harbor and had sunk the British warships *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* in Southeast Asian waters. Desperate to salvage a degree of autonomy and eager to claim future benefits if the Japanese won the war, Phibun made a fateful decision. He met Japanese demands for full use of Thai facilities, signed a formal alliance and, on 25 January 1942, acceded to Japanese urgings to declare war on Britain, and the United States.

Even though the stunningly successful Japanese offensive left the Allied Powers reeling, China, Great Britain, and the United States all anticipated eventual victory, and each nurtured ambitions to exert influence in postwar Thailand. The Chinese wanted to re-establish their nation as a regional power and hoped for the opportunity to intervene on behalf of the Chinese residents in Thailand. The British sought a measure of retribution for Thai support of the Japanese invasions of Malaya and Burma and the re-establishment of the economic and political influence they had enjoyed before Japan's incursion. Some in London also perceived a golden opportunity to claim strategic territory from Thailand in the Kra Isthmus area. The Americans, meanwhile, began to view Thailand as a potential economic and strategic foothold in a region that figured to be both important and unstable in the postwar era.

[13] The Thai casualty figures are recorded in George (Bangkok) to Thai Committee, 11 September 1945, Folder 749, Box 124, Entry 88, Record Group (hereafter, RG) 226, US National Archives, College Park, MD (hereafter, USNA).

1 The origins of the Free Thai movement

The Thai took great pride in their nation's status as the lone independent state in Southeast Asia, so most resented the uninvited arrival of Japanese troops. The nation's leaders were dismayed, too, but painfully aware of the futility of resistance. Some doubted the wisdom of Phibun's decision to embrace Japan fully, however, anticipating that the Allies would prevail in the end. In such an eventuality, they knew that Thailand would be in dire straits if it remained yoked to a defeated Japan.

From 8 December 1941, these skeptics looked to Phibun Songkhram's chief political rival Pridi Phanomyong, who had served as interior minister, foreign minister, and finance minister in successive cabinets, for leadership. Pridi, resentful of the growing army dominance in Thai politics, had responded to Phibun's tilt toward Japan and the Axis Powers by moving toward a pro-British stance even before the war began. Because the Japanese were suspicious of Pridi, Phibun relieved him of the finance portfolio in mid-December 1941, softening the blow by appointing him to the prestigious, but politically impotent, Council of Regents that acted for the nation's absent monarch, the teenaged King Ananda.

Phibun and his supporters saw full cooperation with Japan as the best course available, but were well aware of the risks. As a Thai police officer pointed out to an interned British civilian, if the Japanese won the war they would be in a position to dominate Thailand totally. On the other hand, if the Japanese lost: "Then we must pray to Buddha to give us a golden tongue to explain how it all happened."[1]

Fortunately for Thailand, one such "golden tongue" emerged in the form of the thirty-six-year-old Thai minister in Washington, M. R. Seni Pramot (Pramoj).[2] A great-grandson of King Rama II (r. 1809–24), Seni, like many descendants of the Chakri kings, had gone to study in England

[1] Gerald Sparrow, *Land of the Moonflower* (London, 1955), 92.
[2] "M. R." is the abbreviation of the title "Mom Rachiwong" which signifies that the title holder is a great-grandson of a king.

1. M. R. Seni Pramot (Pramoj) (1905–1997), Thai minister to the United States 1940–1945, who founded and led the Free Thai movement abroad and became prime minister of Thailand in September 1945. (Source: US National Archives)

as a teenager. A superior scholar, he earned an Oxford degree and gained admission to the English bar. Although his father had lost his position as head of the Thai police force with the overthrow of the absolute monarchy, Seni returned home to join the Justice Ministry of the new regime. After participating in a Pridi-directed project to codify the nation's laws, Seni became a judge in the Bangkok Court of Appeals in 1938. He also taught at Thammasat University (then known as the University of Moral and Political Sciences), a school Pridi had founded and made a main base of his political support.

Years later, after he had irrevocably split with Pridi, Seni attributed his 1940 Washington assignment to Pridi's jealousy of his popularity with