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THAILAND TODAY

By HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS
PRINCE CHULA OF THAILAND, G.C.V.O.

Report of the Anniversary Lecture delivered to the Royal Central Asian Society on Wednesday, June 14, 1961, Sir William Dickson in the chair.

The PRESIDENT: Your Royal Highness, Your Excellencies, My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen: I have the honour to introduce to you our Anniversary Lecturer, His Royal Highness Prince Chula of Thailand. We are honoured, and very grateful and fortunate to have His Royal Highness with us this afternoon to talk about his country. It does occupy, as you know, and always has done, a key position in South-East Asia.

His Royal Highness is, of course, extremely well-known to all of us, and is a very popular figure in England; an intrepid racing motorist, an author, and a speaker on the television and radio; Her Royal Highness the Princess, who could not be here this afternoon, is an English lady; one of their homes is in Cornwall, and, amongst other things, they are Freemen of the City of Bodmin. So we know a great deal about His Royal Highness in England. In Thailand, as you know, he has very special connections; he is first cousin to His Majesty the King of Thailand, and is his special A.D.C.

Naturally, he is an authority on his own country, but his lecture to us this afternoon is of special interest and importance, firstly, because we have a very close and very old friendly relationship, interest and sympathy with, and love and understanding for Thailand, and anything we hear about it is of great interest, and secondly, because His Royal Highness has only just come back from a visit there and will be able to give us an up-to-date account of conditions of life in Thailand as it is today.

H.R.H. PRINCE CHULA of Thailand: Mr. Chairman, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen: it is a very great privilege for me to be addressing you once again, after the occasion, a few years ago, when I came to talk to you about my country. At that time you had just a talk; today I have been asked by the Council of your Society to bring a film. But, before we go on to the film, may I just say a few words with, perhaps, some fresh information, further to what some of you, if you were present then, may have heard at my last talk.

The size of our country has not increased; we are still approximately 200,000 square miles, or about, say, the size of France, or four times the size of England and Wales; but our population has greatly increased and, at the census of April, 1960, it was found that we have a population of 26½ million. That is a very big increase indeed for us. Until recently our population was increasing at the rate of three-quarters of a million a year, and now we find, not entirely to our satisfaction, that we are increasing at the rate of a million a year; and, although our area should be capable of supporting a population of 55 to 60 millions, it will not be as comfortable as it is now, and there may be very serious difficulties—so much so that even very important Government spokesmen, such as the Minister of Finance,

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recently spoke about the serious necessity of some form of birth control if we are to maintain the standard of living which we have:

Despite the increase in the population, we are still largely an agricultural community. Over 75 per cent. of our people are still agriculturalists, and, of course, the main crop, and almost the only really important crop from the point of view of export, is rice.

Now, the growing of rice by something like over 75 per cent. of our population has got a strangely important social import, and that is that, unlike most countries in Asia—I am not saying this in any way against any of our friendly neighbours, but I repeat—unlike many of our neighbours in Asia, Thailand and the Thai people have always enjoyed almost complete equality between men and women. There has never been a *purdah* in Thailand; there have never been any disadvantages for women. I think this is due to two things; one is the Buddhist religion, which most of us practise—95 per cent., if not more of our people are practising Buddhists; and the other is this rice-growing, for, despite the immense advances made by the West in machinery, I am informed by experts (of which I am not one) that no machine has yet been invented that can sow rice into the field during the flood season (because rice, you know, is put into the land with about 8 inches of water; that is why we have to have paddy fields with little 12-inch or 18-inch banks to keep the water in), no machine has yet been invented that can supplant the fair hands of women to plant the rice. Therefore in our country, in the most important part of our country, the farmers, the men and women, work side by side; and that may be responsible for the equality in the status of Thai women with men.

In the past, we did have polygamy, and a man could have as many wives as he could afford. I would say that polygamy was an undemocratic system, because you have to be fairly well off, even in Thailand, to keep more than one woman, and I think that an ordinary farmer would be quite hard put to it to manage even a little bit of bigamy; so that polygamy was restricted to the upper and more well-off classes. I myself never had the pleasure, or the disadvantage, of practising it, because—whether it was done especially to thwart me or to help me I would not know—polygamy was officially abolished in Thailand three years before I was married.

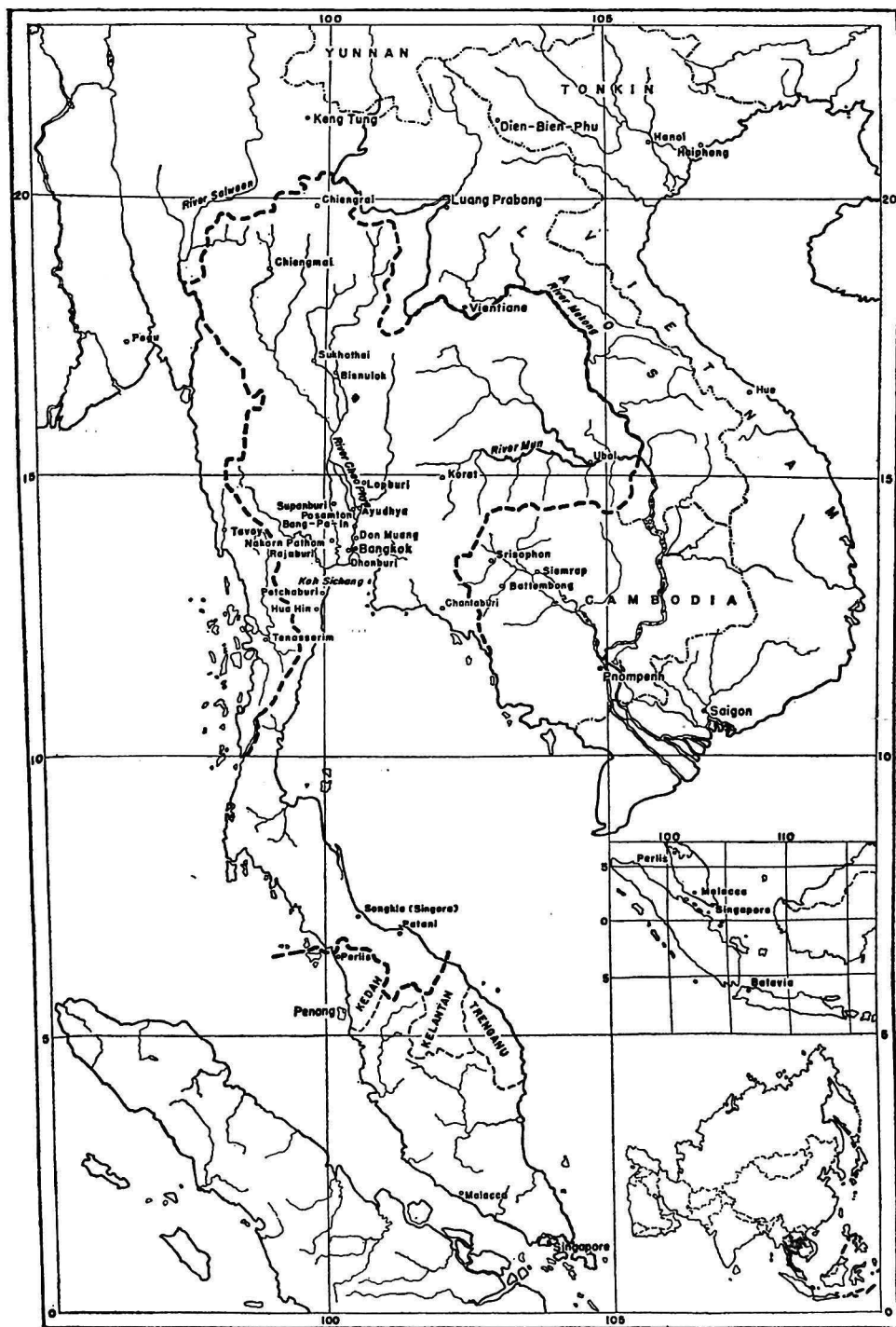
As far as education is concerned, the thirst for education is growing and growing and growing; in fact, we are unable at the moment really to cope with it. When I was there, for the examination for some 700 places in Chulalongkorn University (which you will see in the film) for first-year students there were 10,000 candidates, and it is the same with the Military College, the same with everything; there is a fabulous thirst for education amongst our young people, and that applies to the men and the women, and, educationally, our men and women are equal. Today the women of Thailand, the well-educated ones—I am not talking about the farmers' wives, they work in the fields with their men—also work, and it is now a rare family where the wife does not go out to work. In an average upper middle-class family (if I may use a very old-fashioned term; shall I say, upper middle-income-group family) in Thailand today the husband and wife meet for breakfast, then they go away and each do their work, and often lunch apart, and meet in the evening. We have women who are

lawyers, surgeons, every kind of job; nurses, we have had for years; and we even now have women Civil Service officials, even in the Foreign Service, where, as yet, no woman has reached the rank of Minister or Ambassador (whether His Excellency is relieved by that I could not say), but already they have become Second Secretary, Third Secretary, and so on.

Politically we have gone back a bit, if you regard getting away from parliamentary election as a retrograde step; we have gone back since I last talked to you, because it was found, in 1958, that our attempts since 1932 to have some form of parliamentary government were not very successful, and, in my opinion (and I am absolutely independent of the Government or of any official backing whatsoever: I speak as an individual Thai person), I think what happened was that although when the Constitution was brought in in 1932 we had always had a half-nominated and half-elected Parliament, and although our people understood very well their rights to elect M.P.s, what I think they did not understand was the responsibility connected with it. Therefore it was possible for a candidate to appeal to the people for the benefit of a particular locality; a candidate who was willing to come along and say: "You need a new school; when I get into Parliament I will give you a new school. If you need a new bridge, I will see to it that you get a new bridge," was liable to be elected. Thus, there was a case where rights divorced from responsibility did not work, and therefore we had a great bulge in the middle of Parliament of Independent M.P.s. Something like 60 per cent. were Independents, and the Government Party was about 20 per cent. on the one side, and the official Opposition about 20 per cent. on the other. The Independent members would say: "We will work for you if you give us a portfolio," and of course the Government could not give them all a portfolio, nor could the Opposition have got in. Therefore it was necessary, I think, for Field-Marshal Sarit Dhanarat to make the Revolution in 1958.

I do claim to be a historian, though probably not a very good one, but I think it is most unusual to have a Revolution not against a monarchy, not against a class, not against a government, but against the Constitution itself. Field-Marshal Sarit Dhanarat felt that it was impossible for that situation to continue; therefore he made the Revolution, and the country is now being governed by a Government which is based on an emergency, and the gist of it is that the Assembly is a nominated one for the time being, which exercises its legislative functions, and at the same time its main job is to try to enact a new Constitution that will be suitable to us.

Now, when that will happen, I do not know. Our only foreign policy is our adherence to the Charter of the United Nations and our membership of the South-East Asia Treaty Organization, which has its headquarters in Bangkok, and whose Secretary-General is a Thai, Mr. Pote Sarasin, a former Prime Minister. I think it would be wrong to disguise from you that, when I was there, with this Laotian crisis, we were disappointed and depressed by the failure of the South-East Asia Treaty Organization to take any firm action. I had the privilege, as a Major-General in the Thai Army, of being present at the S.E.A.T.O. exercise, shortly before the really serious turn of the Laotian situation, which was carried out in the north-east part of our country, and it was the first time that we had



a S.E.A.T.O. exercise where we had a joint command and joint staff between ourselves, the United States and the British Commonwealth, and it went extremely well, and the welding of the staff work was quite astonishing. But it would not be fair to you, as serious observers of affairs in Asia, to keep from you the fact that the complete failure to take any action in Laos has had a very depressing effect in that part of Asia, particularly in our armed forces, who are very keen, very well trained, and, until then, very optimistic.

Financially, the budget, if you look at it without carefully scrutinizing it, seems to show a deficit, but I have had a very serious, long talk with the Finance Minister, who is a friend of mine, and the budget really is quite strong, because in current expenditure we have included capital expenditure. We do have quite a comfortable surplus and, if the budget shows a deficit, it is because we are very honest in our budgeting and we have put capital expenditure (and, despite the fact that we are helped by the World Bank and the United States and the Colombo Plan, we have also put in a great deal of capital expenditure ourselves), we have put the capital expenditure into the budget as part of ordinary expenditure. That is why, if you look casually at the budget, you will think we are in deficit, but actually we are not. Our natural resources are immense, according to the World Bank and other authorities, and I am happy to say that I think we are alright financially and should be for some time.

The happiest thing that has happened in Thailand in the last year has been the visits of our King and Queen to an enormous number of countries outside the Iron Curtain, where they have been most wonderfully well received, and they themselves have, I think, put up a wonderful show. We are told that we have the most beautiful Queen in the world—by that, I mean a Queen Consort, not a Queen Sovereign like yours, so there is no competition there. We are told—we do not say it—that we have the most beautiful Queen in the world and that she gave wonderful support to the King, and they have had a most marvellous reception everywhere.

But what is even more important to you, as observers of South-East Asia, or Central Asia, is that we had a Revolution. The Thai people are very polite, as you know, and we prefer to call it a change of régime, but actually we had a Revolution in 1932 when the Royal Family, to which I have the honour to belong, were ousted from power. Since then the power has passed into other hands, but, unlike many other Royal Families, the Royal Family of Thailand has remained on the throne—and for a time—with a certain amount of difficulty, anxiety, and awkwardness, which is only natural after such a big change. But I am happy to say that, since the Royal visits, the prestige of our King, now that he has come back, has risen beyond all expectations (*Applause*), and today he and the Queen enjoy tremendous respect and popularity, as I have seen for myself. I have had the privilege of walking behind them when they go to various ceremonies and they are greeted and followed with tremendous enthusiasm, which I personally had not seen for many years.

That is, more or less, the state of our country, and I have been asked to illustrate my talk with this film, which will give you an idea of Thailand today; not a hundred per cent. picture, because how could one do that of a



PRINCE CHULA AT HIS DESK AT TREDETHY, BODMIN, CORNWALL



PART OF CHULA CONGKORN UNIVERSITY



THE MARBLE TEMPLE, BANGKOK

country of 26½ million people and 200,000 square miles? And may I remind you that Bangkok, our present capital, is a very new city compared with London. It was founded by my great-great-great-grandfather, only in 1782, that is barely 180 years ago, after we had had a disastrous defeat at the hands of our then enemies, but now our friends, the Burmese. Therefore there is nothing in Bangkok which is over 180 years old.

I thank you very much for your kind attention, and I will speak about the film while it is being shown.

(The lecturer then gave a commentary on his film, in the course of which he drew attention to the following points of interest):

Bangkok is a large city, 22 miles long from north to south and 12 miles broad; it is also a big seaport, 750 ships entering and leaving its harbours during a year. Many of its fine buildings, including the so-called Marble Temple (built with marble brought from Carrara in 1897) were erected in the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1868 to 1910), who also made the many very broad roads. After his death, the money collected for his memorial was used to found a university.

Thailand is a Buddhist country, but there is complete religious toleration. Seventy-four per cent. of the people are literate, compulsory education having been in operation since 1926. One foreign language is obligatory in the schools, and 95 per cent. of the pupils choose English, which is used extensively in dealing with foreigners. Thailand has its own written language, the Thai script having been invented in 1293.

National dress is no longer general, but is worn for special occasions. Thailand has retained its traditional music, but has also adopted Western music, both for ordinary orchestras and for its military bands. It tries to preserve ancient rituals and traditions, while at the same time seeking to progress.

No coal or oil is found in Thailand, but wood fuel is used, even for the trains, with one exception—that, for long-distance trains, diesel engines are used.

The farmers are the backbone of the country. There are about 18 million of them, nearly all freeholders, owning perhaps 5 to 25 acres, each living on the land and selling the surplus. They should not be susceptible to possible Communist propaganda, because they are free, and they are property owners; and they are the most stabilizing influence in the country.

The other great stabilizing factor is the Army, which has 100,000 men and contributes to S.E.A.T.O. They had 10,000 troops in Korea during the Korean war, and lost 1,000 men. Every part of the Army, including the troops one sees in ceremonial parades, is a fighting unit; the equipment is American, supplied through S.E.A.T.O. The men are drawn largely from among the farmers, and are quick to learn. They have two years' training, but without waiting to finish that course they can, if they wish, apply to go to an Officers' Training Unit. The days when South-East Asian troops were thought of as cannon fodder are gone; today the men are well educated, properly fed and clothed, and much welfare work is carried out among them.

The PRESIDENT: Your Excellencies, My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I know I speak for all of you when I offer my very sincere congratulations and our great thanks for a remarkable Anniversary Lecture. Speaking for myself, I found it fascinating from beginning to end; an interesting introduction about life today in Thailand, and its problems, brilliantly presented, and then the film.

So we thank you very much indeed, Your Royal Highness, and particularly for that peep into a truly remarkable family album.

(The vote of thanks was accorded by acclamation and the meeting then ended.)



