

# Fascinating Deeds: The Cosmopolitan History of a Plot in Bangrak

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**Abstract**—This article offers a window into the cosmopolitan history of Bangkok through focus on a single plot of land in Bangrak district. The study was made possible by the nature of *chanot* (land title deeds), which record successive transactions. Americans, Portuguese, and Chinese characters figure in the history of the plot. Protestant missionaries acquired the land through association with the adjacent Portuguese consulate. The land increased in value as Bangrak became a commercial center, and was sold in the 1890s. A Portuguese family from Macao, who arrived in 1840 and became prominent in royal service and rice milling, acquired an adjacent plot. During 1922-1923, both were sold to Lert Sreshtaputra, the most successful Teochew entrepreneur of his era. The warehouses on the site were commandeered by the Japanese in the Second World War, then sold in 1946, and converted into the Warehouse 30 project in 2017. The story of the land showcases the changing usage and ethnic complexity of the city center.

This article presents a vignette of Bangkok's cosmopolitanism through the lens of a single plot of land in the district of Bangrak. This study was made possible by the format of modern Thai land title deeds. In 1901 the Government of Siam mandated a new system of land titles. There had been documents granting ownership and use of land long before, but the 1901 law created a standard system with a title deed known as *chanot thidin*, literally a "written record of land". The law made each document perpetually attached to the plot of land through changes of ownership. These documents are thus records of change and a window into history (Figure 14).

Bangrak is a district of Bangkok stretching along the east bank of the Chao Phraya River south of the Phadung Krung Kasem canal which bounded the old city (Figure 2). This district developed rapidly from the later 19th century, especially as a site of European businesses, consulates and embassies, including the British Embassy, Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, and the Oriental Hotel.

The plot featured in this article covers 3.9 *rai* (0.62 hectare), stretching between Charoen Krung Soi 30 (Captain Bush Lane) and Soi 32, just behind the riverside site of the Portuguese Embassy. The plot was divided between three *chanot* deeds (Figure 1). In 1946 all three were acquired by the Chavanich family. The site is now occupied by Warehouse 30, a collection of warehouses commandeered by the Japanese army in the Second World War, later used as industrial storage, and transformed into an art complex by the architect Duangrit Bunnag in 2017 (Figure 13). The title deeds for the

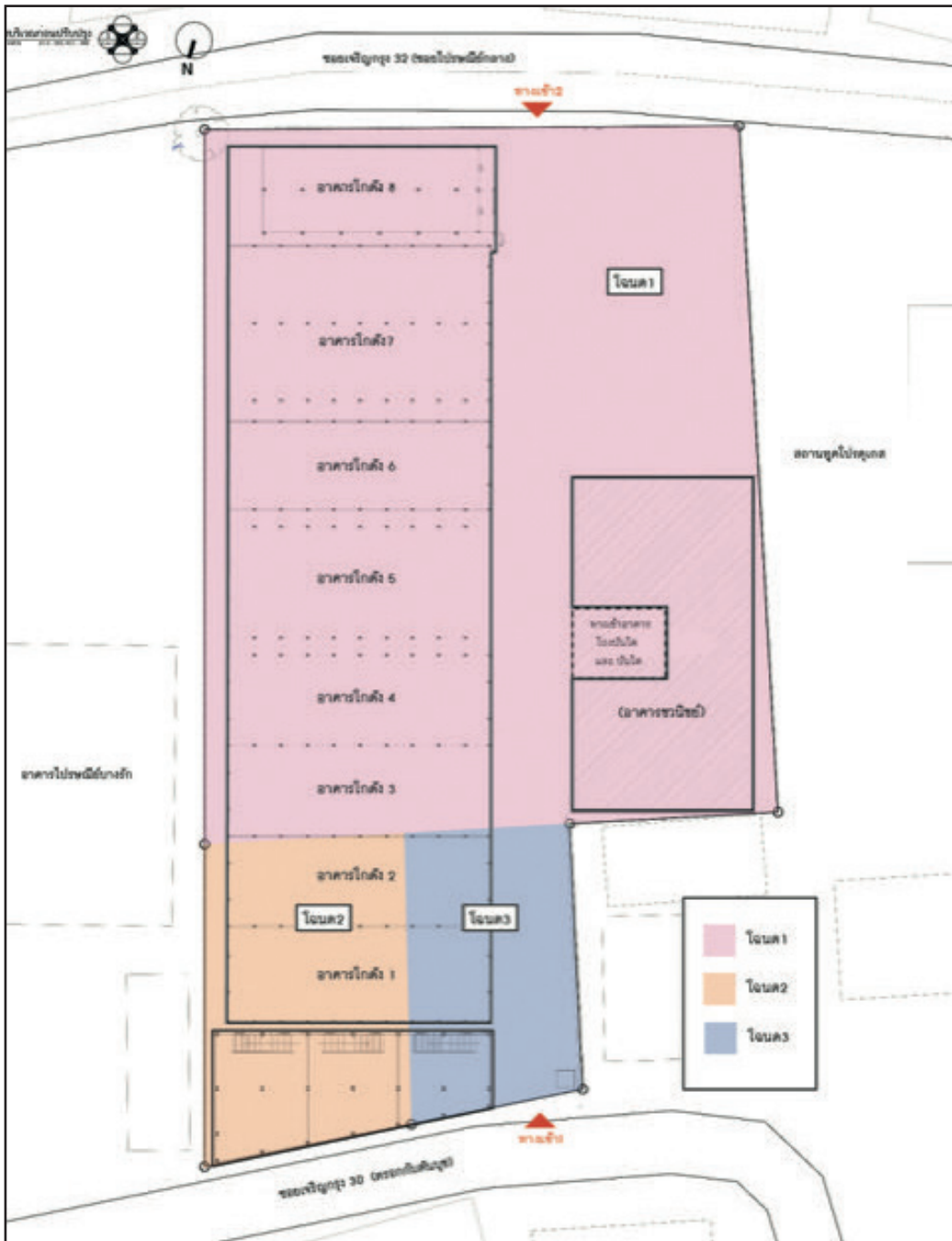


Figure 1. Location of the three deeds by Chanida Chavanich. Deed 1 in pink; Deed 2 in orange; Deed 3 in Blue. Note that the road at the top is Charoen Krung Soi 32, and at the bottom is Soi 30 (Captain Bush Lane).



Figure 2. Map of the location in Bangrak. The base map is from the 1887 *Maps of Bangkok and Thonburi*. The inset is the Richards Map from 1856.



land on which the complex stands tell a story of two diasporas and one international religious movement which intermingled in Thailand's history: the Chinese or Sino-Siamese diaspora, the Portuguese or Luso-Asian diaspora, and the Christian Evangelical Movement called the Protestant Second Great Awakening.

### The American Baptists in Bangkok

When the ownership was first inscribed on *chanot* in the early 20th century, most of the plot was in the possession of the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society.

In the 19th century, the USA was swept by the Second Great Awakening, an evangelical movement which founded many missionary associations, including the American Baptist Mission, primarily from a sense of duty, religious duty, based on the commands of Jesus Christ to "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39) and "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Mathew 28:19).<sup>1</sup>

The main target of these associations in Asia was China, but China remained closed, so some associations conceived of Siam as a training ground and stepping stone for missionary work in China.<sup>2</sup> From the 1820s, the Siamese government cautiously allowed missionaries to enter and proselytize. When the first American Baptists arrived in 1833, their most useful contact was a Portuguese ex-diplomat.

In the chaos of the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767, all the Western communities withdrew from Siam, apart from a cohort of Portuguese descendants who had fought with the Siamese and relocated to the new capital of Thonburi. In the early 19th century, the Siamese court encouraged the Portuguese government to re-establish relations.<sup>3</sup> In 1820 the Brazilian Carlos Manuela de Silveira arrived in Bangkok to negotiate a new Treaty of Friendship and Trade with Siam. Once this was achieved, King Rama II granted Portugal a plot of riverside land that had earlier been occupied by the fugitive Vietnamese Emperor Gia Long. The plot stretched 144 meters along the waterfront and was 100 meters deep (Figure 3).

A consulate was built but trade failed to develop, so in 1825 Portugal simply disowned the project. Carlos Manuela de Silveira, "left high and dry in lonely vigil,"<sup>4</sup> stayed on in Bangkok and became a key intermediary between the Siamese authorities and sundry foreigners, including the British official visitors, John Crawford and Henry Burney, and also the missionaries.<sup>5</sup>

The 1820 land grant was given to Portugal as a foreign power with the purpose

<sup>1</sup> Wells 1958: 3.

<sup>2</sup> Wells 1958: 3.

<sup>3</sup> "On 28 December 1786, King Rama I sent a letter to Queen Maria of Portugal inviting her to open a trading post in Bangkok. The King offered land to build a Roman Catholic Church and to support a *feitoria*, or trading post, a dock and a shipyard to facilitate Portuguese trade.... Through a letter of concession, signed by His Minister Chao Phya Surivon Montri, addressed to the Viceroy of Portuguese India, and dated 9 November 1820, King Rama II offered to the King of Portugal a piece of riverfront land for the construction of a 'feitoria' (trading post), consulate and official residence for the Portuguese consul general." Vaz Patto 2019: 143, 144.

<sup>4</sup> Moreby 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Da Silva 1982: 17.



of furthering Siam's outward-facing ambitions: to house the first foreign consulate in Bangkok and serve as a trading hub for Portuguese factors. It was a non-economic diplomatic transaction. As such revocation of the land grant would be problematic, even if the anticipated economic benefits did not materialize.<sup>6</sup>

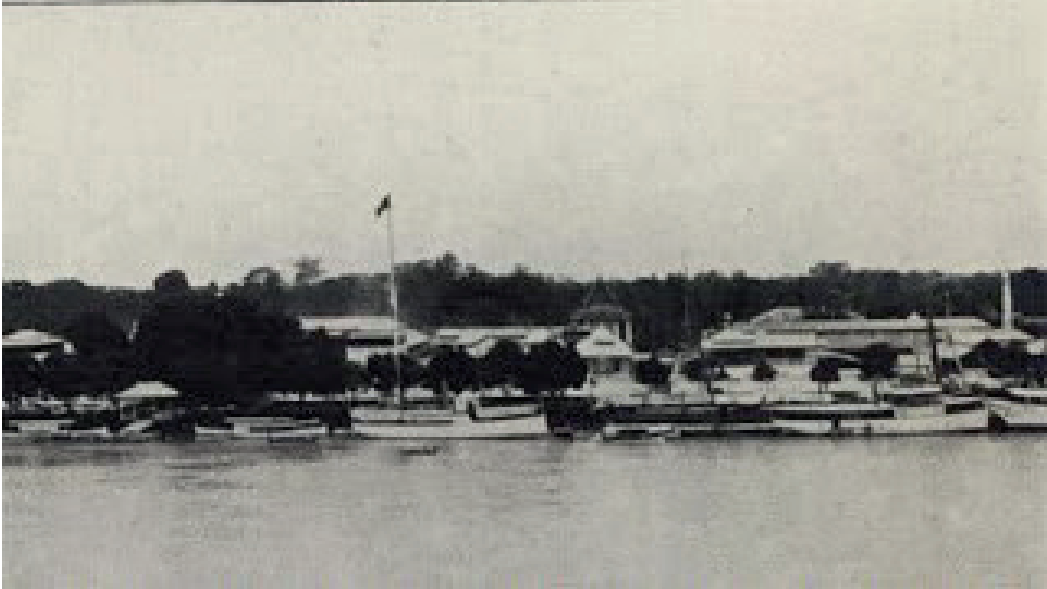


Figure 3. A rare photo (1905) of the land of the Consulate of Portugal, with the flagpole which was used as the reference point for navigating the channels towards the Chao Phraya River.

King Rama III succeeded his father in 1824 and he wanted to protect valuable land from the “shifting agendas of foreign counterparts.” He perceived that his father’s grant of ownership rights to the Portuguese had been a mistake to be avoided in the future. In 1826 he made the first treaty between Siam and Great Britain, known as the Burney Treaty. This gave Siamese officials liberty to deny English merchants permission to stay and the authority to set terms for their residence in the country. Robert Hunter, a trader who arrived in 1824, tried to obtain permission to own a residence and warehouse under the terms of the treaty but he was ordered to rent rather than own his property.<sup>7</sup>

When Reverend Jacob Tomlin of the London Missionary Society and Reverend Carl Frederick Augustus Gutzlaff of the Netherlands Missionary Society arrived in 1828, they were indeed privileged to be welcomed by the Portuguese Consul De Silveira as his house guests. He let them stay in guest residential quarters at the back of the consular compound and later extended the arrangement on a rental basis. He could do so because the consulate land belonged to Portugal and was exempt from the residence restrictions of the Burney Treaty.

However, Reverend Gutzlaff, in an excess of zeal, “within the first two days of his arrival, gave great cause of offence to the government; for he immediately threw many

<sup>6</sup> Landy 2021: 61.

<sup>7</sup> Landy 2021: 65.

thousands of tracts into every floating house, boat, and junk, as well as into cottages. An order was issued for his immediate expulsion from the country, and that his tracts should be collected and burnt.”<sup>8</sup> After negotiations, the missionaries were allowed to stay and operate under certain restrictions. Gutzlaff sent an appeal to Protestant churches in America to send more missionaries to Siam because the European churches had not answered the call. The first to arrive, David Abeel, was again hosted by De Silveira<sup>9</sup>



Figure 4. Rev. John Taylor Jones and his wife Eliza Grew (Wikipedia; public domain)

In 1833 the American Baptist Board for Foreign Missions responded to Gutzlaff’s appeal by sending John Taylor Jones (1802–1851) and his first wife, Eliza Grew Jones (1803–1838), who had been residing in Burma for about two years (Figure 4). King Rama III and the US Envoy Edmund Roberts had just concluded the Treaty of Amity and Commerce between His Majesty the Magnificent King of Siam and the United States of America. Roberts noted that Jones was warmly received on arrival. He attributed this partly to the fact that the Buddhist monks “believe themselves so firmly seated that they do not trouble themselves about the Protestant preachers,” and partly to “his being an American citizen, and because of the friendly terms existing between the government of Siam and the United States.”<sup>10</sup>

On his arrival in Bangkok Jones naturally sought out the Portuguese Consul Seignior de Silveira who had been such a friend and benefactor to his predecessors, and doubtless through his help succeeded in renting the land adjoining the Consulate which was apparently later sold to the Baptist Mission.<sup>11</sup> The family at first stayed in

<sup>8</sup> Roberts 1837: 268.

<sup>9</sup> USIS 1997: 27.

<sup>10</sup> Roberts 1837: 269.

<sup>11</sup> McFarland 1928: 9.

the accommodations of the US envoy until Carlos De Silveira again intervened. “He rented Mr. Jones a small plot of ground at the rear of the Portuguese Consulate where Rev. Jones built a house with walls of bamboo and settled down to study Siamese and to prepare literature.”<sup>12</sup>

After this, De Silveira fades from the story, probably having left Siam.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, the Baptists were able to remain in a permanent location behind the consulate which



Figure 5. Early Baptist Mission residences (McFarland 1928: after 69).

was where the Baptist mission was to develop over the following years. By 1840, the contiguity of the Baptist mission and the Portuguese consulate was a recognized feature of the Bangkok riverscape.<sup>14</sup>

In stark contrast, missionaries sent by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions struggled to find a place to stay, let alone establish their missions.<sup>15</sup> With the signing of the Bowring Treaty in 1855, foreign residents were finally allowed to purchase land but they could only do so in central Bangkok after ten years of residence.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Wells 1958: 17.

<sup>13</sup> He might have left the Kingdom as early as 1829 according to Portuguese records, or as late as 1834 according to the Siamese court records and the history of Protestant Missions. In any case, he left no record of where he went or what he did after that. Da Silva Rego 1982: 18

<sup>14</sup> Landy 2021: 71. However, it seems possible that the Mission purchased the land before investing in construction of the mission’s facilities (dwellings, chapel, printing press, type foundry etc.), or the Consulate may have sold it to a wealthy Portuguese merchant named Joaquim Maria Xavier by that time and the Mission land might have been rented from him. In any case, according to the Portuguese Consulate’s records this land was bequeathed to Xavier’s children at his death in 1881.

<sup>15</sup> Landy 2021: 71-83.

<sup>16</sup> Landy 2021: 85.



The Joneses established a missionary station “of very crude construction” (Figure 5). Jones made translation, production and distribution of religious tracts his life’s work and the mission station eventually included “dwellings, chapel, printing press, type foundry, book bindery, libraries, schools.”<sup>17</sup> He quickly learned Siamese so well that he was said to be “more fluent in Siamese than English.”<sup>18</sup> The first church was formed on 1 July 1837 but a chapel was not built until 1839. Church membership in 1837 numbered seventeen (only nine Chinese converts), but by 1850 grew to thirty-five members of whom thirty were “native believers”.<sup>19</sup> His preaching was primarily with the Chinese in Bangkok. He made a translation of the New Testament from Greek to Thai. By 1840 58,000 copies had been distributed.<sup>20</sup> Eliza Jones published a *Siamese-English Dictionary* in 1833, created a Romanized script for the Siamese language, translating the Bible stories of Joseph and Moses into Thai, taught small children, and wrote Siamese poetry, hymns and a Siamese school book. However, she never felt at home in Siam. Soon after their arrival she wrote:

We feel that we are exiles from our native land, our beloved friends, the religious privileges we once enjoyed, and even from civilized life [...] When we look around on those among whom we dwell, and feel what it is to live in the midst of ‘a people of unclean lips,’ we are ready to cry with Israel’s psalmist, ‘My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the Lord.’<sup>21</sup>

Three years later she still felt they were living “in the heart of the enemy’s country”, constantly battling against an ignorant and often hostile environment. Living conditions were harsh and unhealthy for foreigners and the death rate among them was very high. Missionaries wore the Victorian clothing from their homelands, long, heavy, dark material suited for northern climates. Eliza died of cholera in 1838 at age thirty-five.

Taylor Jones remarried in November 1840 to Judith Leavitt who died at sea in 1846, while en route back to visit the US, and then to Sarah Sleeper a year later, before himself dying of dysentery in 1851 at age forty-nine.

In 1853 Sarah married Samuel J. Smith, an India-born orphan who Taylor and Eliza had adopted in Burma before their arrival in Siam. He was sent to the US for education at Brown and Amherst, and to learn printing, returning in 1849. After his marriage to Sarah, he left the mission, and established an independent printing press at Bang Ko Laem which published religious works but also a Thai-English dictionary, some of the first periodicals in Siam, and several works of Thai literature. Sarah served 42 years as a missionary in Bangkok and was buried in the Protestant cemetery in 1889.

In 1846 the American Baptist Board for Foreign Missions closed its office in Siam and moved to China although the American Baptist Mission stayed on. Late in the Third

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<sup>17</sup> Trakulhun 2013: 1216.

<sup>18</sup> Trakulhun 2013: 1216.

<sup>19</sup> McFarland 1928: 348-349.

<sup>20</sup> Smith 1980: 30.

<sup>21</sup> Jones 1842, 79-80; quoted in Trakulhun 2013: 1214.

Reign, attitudes to foreigners soured because of growing awareness of their colonialist mindset and involvement in the opium trade. A history of the Baptist Mission reports:

In 1850 there were a number of bad incidents where those connected with the foreign missionaries were treated badly. Siamese teachers were thrown into prison, their servants fled, fearing the King and his ministers. Nobody would rent or sell houses or lands to the missions and many refused to sell them food. Even the lives of the missionaries were in danger. There seemed no alternative but to withdraw.<sup>22</sup>

In January 1851 Rama III fell seriously ill, and in that very month the Baptist mission was burnt to the ground. The cause of the fire was never satisfactorily established. The same historian surmised: “Probably it was deliberate arson.”<sup>23</sup> The second edition of Jones’ translation of the New Testament was lost in the fire.



Figure 6. Sarah Sleeper and Samul J. Smith.

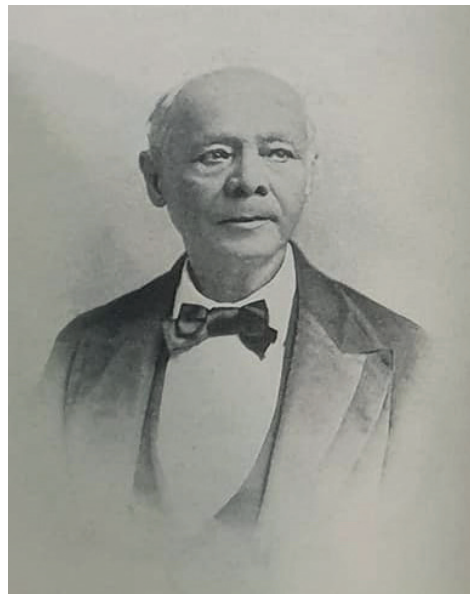


Figure 7. Samul J. Smith..

After King Mongkut, Rama IV, ascended the throne later in 1851, the atmosphere improved somewhat. The king persuaded three missionary wives, including Sarah Jones, to take turns teaching the court ladies in English, geography, astronomy and history, and also allowed them to “explain the story of Christ.” But after an anonymous letter in Singapore attacked the character of the king, and accused the missionary wives of attempting to convert the students to Christianity during the lessons, the project was abandoned. In 1854 the owners of land rented to the Baptists with government consent was seized and jailed in irons and accused of “selling royal land” to foreigners. They were released four days later with a warning not to rent land to missionaries. A royal

<sup>22</sup> Smith 1980: 41.

<sup>23</sup> Smith 1980: 41.

decree in 1855 confined the movement of missionaries and their servants, forbidding them to travel past the Customs House in the north of Bangrak.<sup>24</sup>

The situation changed from 1855, when Siam signed the Bowring Treaty with Britain followed by replica treaties with other Western nations, including the US. Prior to the treaty, the Western community in Bangkok numbered no more than forty people. “At least half of this community were the French Catholic and American Protestant missionaries, the remainder consisting of a handful of merchants and shipbuilders, possibly five British mariners working as captains on Siamese vessels and a couple of Westerners employed in other roles by the Siamese aristocracy.”<sup>25</sup> By 1860 the number had spurted to 145, including over forty merchants, clerks, engineers, shipbuilders and various service providers, with another thirty residents employed as master mariners on the flourishing international shipping routes.<sup>26</sup>

Before the treaty, the Western community was scattered on both banks of the Chao Phraya river but the newcomers chose to stay in Bangrak, southward from the Portuguese Consulate to the next bend in the river, an area that was still sparsely settled. The missionaries disdained the new class of entrepreneurs as “adventurers”. The newcomers returned the dislike, considering the missionaries to be “prigs and hypocrites.”<sup>27</sup> The building of the first modern road, Charoen Krung (Prosperous City or Prosperity of the City), in 1862–1864 confirmed this area as a center of the city’s fast expanding commerce.

Business was thriving but the work of the Baptist missionaries was not. In 1861 the Thai Baptist Church had thirty to thirty-five followers, but never more. In 1869 the Baptists gave up missionary work among the Siamese but they continued to minister to the Chinese community which had yielded 500 converts by 1882.<sup>28</sup> The Rev. Lewis Anson Eaton, who arrived in 1882, became the sole survivor of the Baptist Mission in Siam. In 1893 he sold the Baptist compound as well as the old burial ground of the missions which was near the Portuguese Consulate. The remains of those buried there were transferred to the Protestant Cemetery given by King Mongkut in 1853.<sup>29</sup> When Eaton left, he placed the Baptist work in the care of a physician, Dr. H. Adamson.

From 1833 to 1894, the Baptist Church of America had sent thirty-five missionaries to Siam. Nine of them died in Siam and six were transferred to China.<sup>30</sup> Overall, the average length of service of any Protestant missionary was five or six years. The overall toll for Baptist, Congregational, and Presbyterian Protestants who “died in the field” was sixty-one.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Smith 1980: 44.

<sup>25</sup> Landy 2021: 83.

<sup>26</sup> Landy 2021: 84.

<sup>27</sup> Smith 1980: 57.

<sup>28</sup> Saiyasak 2003: 9.

<sup>29</sup> McFarland 1928: 33 No details concerning the sale could be found, nor details of when or how the mission acquired ownership of the land. See Footnote 15 for one possible explanation. We can only assume the two plots of land covered by two of the deeds issued in 1919 were included in this sale.

<sup>30</sup> McFarland 1928: 318.

<sup>31</sup> Wells 1958: 2.



The land where the Baptist Mission had been located was resold about this time. While no record of the 1893 sale under L.E. Eaton could be found, according to the deeds in the possession of the Chavanich family, the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society sold two plots to an enterprise called Swanson and C. Estate in 1919.

### The Xavier family and the Luso-Asian-Macanese diaspora

Joaquim Maria Xavier (1793–1881) migrated from Macao to Bangkok circa 1840. Around this time, Portuguese (i.e. Macanese) investment was focused on buying and selling buildings and opening agricultural companies and alcohol distilleries, which was an extremely lucrative business, and made it possible to provide a good education for their children.<sup>32</sup>

Xavier became “a man of great influence at the Court of three Kings: Rama III, IV and V.”<sup>33</sup> He acquired a house next to (or within) the Baptist mission which was burnt down in the fire of the early 1850s. He was well enough respected in the Siamese community to be given alternative accommodation (the old English Factory), but he was probably allowed to return to the original land plot along with the Baptists.<sup>34</sup> On his death in 1881, this land passed to his three surviving children who resolved to sell it: “By mutual agreement, [they] resolved that the same land be sold by public auction, before this general consulate, to be the product divided by reason of the right of succession into three parts.”<sup>35</sup> According to the records of the Portuguese Consulate, the plot was

located almost at the foot of this consulate and confronted by east with the land of the Siamese Government by the west land of the general consulate of Portugal, north of Bush Lane and south American mission, land on which there are three small wooden houses covered with palm leaves, two on the western side and one on the eastern side, and another in the center also made of wood.<sup>36</sup>

Because of the location of the “three small wooden houses” (which probably belonged to the Baptist Mission), the land could not be easily divided into three equal parts.

The land was sold in auction, with the proceeds to be divided among the three heirs but what happened is not clear. Perhaps the Baptist Mission bought some (now covered under Deeds 1 and 2). Although the mission was winding down its presence in Siam, Bangrak was booming and the mission may have bought the land as speculation. Other missions relied on income from property.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps Xavier’s son Luiz Maria Xavier (1840–1902), who had set up a rice-milling business in the 1880s, bought the third

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<sup>32</sup> Oliveira 2013: 47.

<sup>33</sup> Martins 2011.

<sup>34</sup> Landy 2021: 76.

<sup>35</sup> Martins 2011.

<sup>36</sup> Martins 2011.

<sup>37</sup> McFarland 1928: 25.

plot adjacent to the Portuguese Embassy (now covered under Deed 3) for storage of rice prior to shipping. This is plausible because by 1902 the Portuguese Embassy “had become so badly neglected that the land had been divided into four parts, three of which were rented out. The chancellery and the Consul’s residence occupied the fourth plot of land.”<sup>38</sup>

Before setting up his mills, Luiz had worked as an interpreter for the Harbor Department receiving the rank and title of Khun Phasa Pariwat<sup>39</sup> and later served as Siam’s Deputy Minister of Finance from 1875. He was an influential leader of the expatriate community. He served on the management board of Agency Remy Schmidt & Co. and in the 1880s he set up his own business, Louis Xavier Mills, with his main mill situated adjacent to his residence along Khlong Kut Mai (the Phadung Krung Kasem Canal).<sup>40</sup>

Luiz thus became a wealthy land owner like his father Joaquim. In 1863 he sent his own son Celestino W. Xavier (1854-1922) to study in England, where he learned French, Italian and English (Figure 8). Wealthy Chinese, Persian and Portuguese families started sending their children abroad from the early 1870s, almost a decade ahead of the royal family.<sup>41</sup> Celestino translated *Dante’s Inferno* into Thai.

In 1885 Celestino was assigned to work at the Siamese legation in Paris and accompanied several Siamese envoys to ratify commercial treaties across Europe. When he returned to Bangkok he served as private secretary of Prince Devawongse, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and a year later was promoted to become the director of the translation bureau “as his mastery in French was very exceptional among anglophile Siamese officials.”<sup>42</sup> During the Paknam Crisis of 1893, he was responsible for several letters between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the French Republic and appeared to be the translator during the negotiation between Prince Devawongse and French representatives.<sup>43</sup>

After the crisis, Celestino retained his position as head of the translation bureau but in 1899 he began work behind the scenes to take charge of the structural reform of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The proposal submitted for overhauling the ministry was approved by the king and his council, and while Celestino was supervising this reorganization, he was promoted to be permanent undersecretary of the ministry with the title of Phraya Phipat Kosa, supervising the Harbor Department.<sup>44</sup> In 1906 he was one of the four senior officials who built Si Phraya Road (Four Lords Road) running behind his family residence and rice mill. He also promoted a light railway from Khlong San in Bangkok to the Thachin River, a distance of 33 kilometers. The line was opened in 1905, and the company soon after merged into the Maeklong Railway Company.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Da Silva Rego 1982: 22.

<sup>39</sup> Jintrawet 2019: 29.

<sup>40</sup> Van Roy 2017: 66.

<sup>41</sup> Jintrawet 2019: 25.

<sup>42</sup> Jintrawet 2019: 29.

<sup>43</sup> Jintrawet 2019: 29.

<sup>44</sup> Jintrawet 2019: 29.

<sup>45</sup> Kakizaki 2014: 35-7.

During the Sixth Reign (1910-1925), Celestino was named the Siamese Minister to Rome. In 1919 he was one of the three Siamese delegates to attend the Paris Peace Conference, which gave birth to the League of Nations (Figure 9). He was also called upon to serve as honorary consul for Portugal.<sup>46</sup>



Figure 8. Celestino Maria Xavier (Source: Payer 2013).



Figure 9. Celestino Maria Xavier at the Paris Peace Conference, 1919.

On the death of Luiz in 1902, the land passed to his son Celestino, who is the first name listed on Deed 3. Celestino passed away while serving in Rome in 1922. The executor of his estate, his wife Mrs. Kimkee Phipat Kosa, transferred the title to the plot of land to their daughter Julia Maria in 1923. .

### Lert Sreshthaputra of the Sino-Siamese diaspora

Chinese people have been migrating to Siam for centuries. The first Chinese record of Ayutthaya, from the scribe of the Zheng He voyages in the 1420s, mentioned the resident Chinese. Throughout the Ayutthaya era, Chinese people acted as merchants, shippers and ship crews for the monarchs and nobles. From the 1720s onward, when southwest China began to experience chronic food shortages, larger numbers arrived, mostly Hokkien. After a Teochew Chinese adventurer became King Taksin in 1767, the Teochew community became the majority among the Chinese inflow, and this continued into the Bangkok era.<sup>47</sup> Prominent Chinese men served the 19th century Bangkok kings

<sup>46</sup> Van Roy 2017: 66-67.

<sup>47</sup> Skinner 1957: 40-41.



as merchants and tax farmers. Much larger numbers arrived from the 1870s to serve as entrepreneurs and laborers in the expanding economy based primarily on the rice trade.

Tae Poh (1785-1840) was a merchant and shipper who provided several junks to assist King Rama III by transporting troops to quell a rebellion in the south in 1838,



Figure 10. Lert Sreshthaputra, Nai Lert (Wikipedia, public domain)

and was rewarded with the noble title of Phra Prasert-Vanich (meaning: excellent merchant). He died in 1840 at age fifty-five, leaving funds to build a new *ubosot* (ordination hall) at Wat Klang on Ratchaburana Canal which was renamed Wat Prasert Suthawas in his honor. Two of his five sons succeeded him to the title of Prasert-Vanich and were among the Chinese who according to the Dutch missionary Gutzlaff “became wholly changed to Siamese.”<sup>48</sup>

Tae Poh’s sons became tax farmers at a time when bidding had become very competitive. His second son became indebted to the crown and lost his house in Sampheng. The younger son went bankrupt three times due to overbidding on tax concessions. Yet they retained their place among the Bangkok elite. After King Rama VI introduced the use of surnames in 1913, he bestowed the name of Sreshtaputra (son of the most excellent or wealthy) on Tae Poh’s grandsons.<sup>49</sup> Among these grandsons were Boonrawd Sreshtaputra who founded Boon Rawd Brewery, producer of Singha beer, So Sethaputra, who

authored Thai-English and English-Thai dictionaries, and Lert Sreshtaputra who became perhaps the most outstanding entrepreneur of his generation in Bangkok (Figure 10).<sup>50</sup>

Lert Sreshtaputra (1872–1945) was educated at Suan Ananta School, where he studied English, worked for various firms and became a partner at the Singapore Straits Company (later Fraser and Neave) by the age of twenty. In 1900 his Klong Kut Mai Cash Store, located at the Siphaya Cross, the intersection of Charoen Krung Road and

<sup>48</sup> Sng and Pimpraphai 2015: 129.

<sup>49</sup> As in many families, the descendants chose to transliterate this name into English in several different ways including Setthaput, Sethaputra, Setabutr and others.

<sup>50</sup> Sng and Pimpraphai 2015: 130.

Siphaya Road, one of the most important commercial crossroads in the city at the time, started selling Edison Phonographs.<sup>51</sup> In 1904, at the age of twenty-two, he started Nai Lert Store, the first department store owned by a Thai,<sup>52</sup> offering imported products such as ham, cheese, and canned food. In the same year, he secured the concession for Shell motor spirits and opened a filling station to supply the European autos being imported

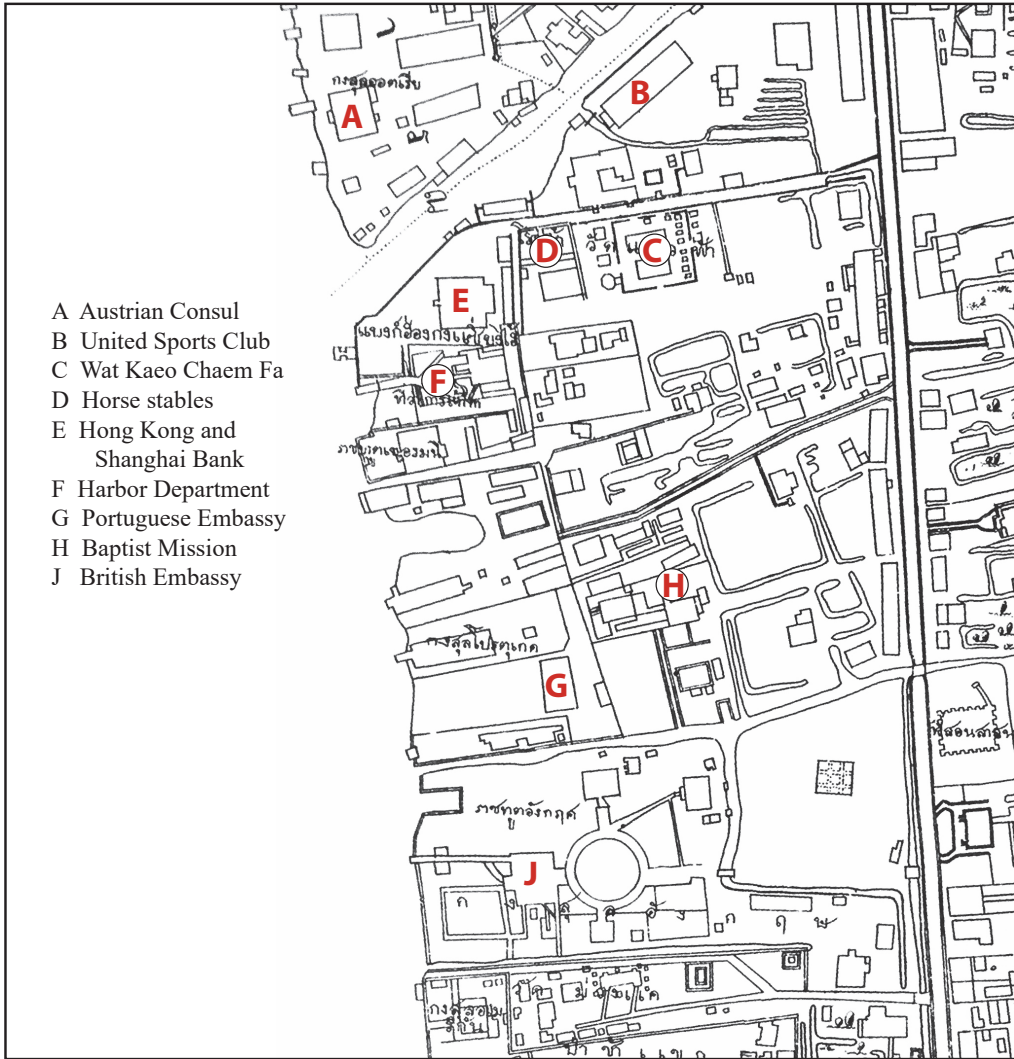


Figure 11. Bangrak in 1887 (1887 Maps of Bangkok and Thonburi)

by royalty. In 1907 he began the White Bus Service using imported engines in locally built bus bodies, followed by a taxi service using Fiat cars and the White Boat Service which operated pleasure boats, seagoing vessels and a public transportation service

<sup>51</sup> Van Beek 2016: 67.

<sup>52</sup> German-owned Falck and Beidek’s *Hang Sing Tho* department store, which opened in 1878, had catered to the elite of Bangkok until then.

along Klong Saen Saep from Pratunam. He also imported ice-making equipment and opened the Hotel de la Paix including a restaurant patronized by Rama VI. In 1917 the king granted him the title of Phraya Pakdee Norasetr, sometimes translated as “beloved millionaire.”



Figure 12. Photo taken by an Allied pilot at the end of the Second World War. The General Post Office is in the center and the property covered by the three deeds is to its right.

He also amassed property in the capital. In 1915 he bought a large piece of rice land in Sapatoom (Srapathum, now the Ploenchit area) from the royal family. At this time, the British were anxious to relocate their embassy away from increasingly overcrowded, polluted and noisy Bangrak. In 1922 Lert made a deal to sell 11 acres of the Sapatoom land for a new British embassy in exchange for an option to buy most of the embassy’s original riverside site in Bangrak for 1.1 million ticals. He promptly sold the Bangrak site to the government for over double his purchase price to become the location of a new General Post Office.<sup>53</sup>

In 1919 the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society sold its two plots of land (Deeds 1 and 2 totaling roughly 3.5 *rai*) to an enterprise called Swanson and C. Estate.<sup>54</sup> A year later, the land was sold to a man of Persian descent. Lert bought both of these plots on 20 November 1922.

Lert did not develop the land but appears to have used it as collateral to raise funds. The deeds show that between 1922 and 1928 the land was mortgaged successively to Bank Siam Fund Co. Ltd., Bank Indochine, and Samuel Brighthouse, a lawyer in the firm of Tilleke and Gibbins.

On 25 October 1923 Lert purchased the other, smaller plot (Deed 3) from Julia Maria Xavier, the descendant of the Xavier clan. Again he used the plot to raise money.

<sup>53</sup> Landy 2021: 20. Deal signed on 23 March 1922.

<sup>54</sup> No information can be found on this enterprise



It was mortgaged on the same day to Lueam Aphaiwong, the oldest son of Chaophraya Aphai Phubet (Chum Aphaiwong) the last governor of Battambang, and then from 1929 to 1943 to R.D. Atkinson, another lawyer from the firm of Tilleke and Gibbins.



Figure 13. Warehouse 30 today (photo: Warehouse30.com)

At some point warehouses were built on the land, probably by the Xavier family's Louis Xavier Mills.<sup>55</sup> During the Second World War, these were commandeered by the Japanese Army. Although the Allied forces bombed Japanese locations along the river, the warehouses survived unscathed and the adjacent General Post Office suffered only a minor hit. At the close of the war, Lert was seventy-three years old and ailing. He let it be known that he had no need nor desire to keep this land. Chuan Chavanich,<sup>56</sup> who had recently started a company to export minerals and raw materials to the United States and needed space for storage before shipment, expressed interest in the land.

Lert died on 15 December 1945. His wife and their daughter Lursakdi, then aged

<sup>55</sup> Prida Chavanich, the father of the current landowners, remembers traces of rice seed and grain in the warehouses after his father purchased the land. Furthermore, identical warehouses existed on the Portuguese Embassy land as well. He and his classmate used to sneak in the Embassy warehouses to catch bugs for bait and the Embassy guards always chased them out.

<sup>56</sup> Chuan Chavanich was born into a Thai family of Chinese descent (Sae-Lo) in Bang Khla, Chachoengsao province. The family was engaged in selling, milling and trading rice. He was sent to study at Suan Kularb school in Bangkok and began his business career at East Asiatic Co where he handled import, export and shipping. He started his own company to tender for national development projects. He invested his profits in property and enjoyed retirement as a wealthy landholder.



twenty-seven, inherited the land and sold it to the Chavanich family on 26 July 1946. The warehouses continued to be used for storage. The original steel structure, exposed beams, and wooden flooring remained. In 2017 the buildings were converted to house shops, cafés, restaurants, and galleries. The new usage, targeted at foreign tourists and Bangkok's avant-garde, reflected the continuing change of the city.

## Appendix

List of Transactions: Deeds 1 and 2 (transactions on these two deeds are identical: the same parties, the same business, the same dates).

1. On 29 February 1919, the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society sold the property to Swanson and C. Estate
2. On 20 April 1920, Swanson and C. Estate sold it to Mr. Amadin Muhammad Hussein.
3. On the same day, 20 April 1920, it was mortgaged to Bank Siam Fund Co. Ltd
4. On 18 October 1922, Mr. Amadin Muhammad Hussein transferred the property to joint ownership with Mr. Hussein Allee Abdul Allee Mesbari.
5. On 20 November 1922, they redeemed the mortgage from Bank Siam Fund Co. Ltd.
6. On 20 November 1922, they (Mr. Amadin Muhammad Hussein and Mr. Hussein Allee Abdul Allee Mesbari) sold it to Lert Sreshthaputra (Phraya Pakdee Norasetr).
7. On 21 November 1922, Lert Sreshthaputra (Phraya Pakdee Norasetr) mortgaged the land with Bank Siam Fund Co. Ltd.
8. On 25 May 1924, Lert Sreshthaputra (Phraya Pakdee Norasetr) redeemed the mortgage with Bank Siam Fund Co. Ltd.
9. On 25 May 1924, Lert Sreshthaputra (Phraya Pakdee Norasetr) mortgaged the land to Bank Indochine.
10. On 28 June 1928, Lert Sreshthaputra (Phraya Pakdee Norasetr) redeemed the mortgage from Bank Indochine.

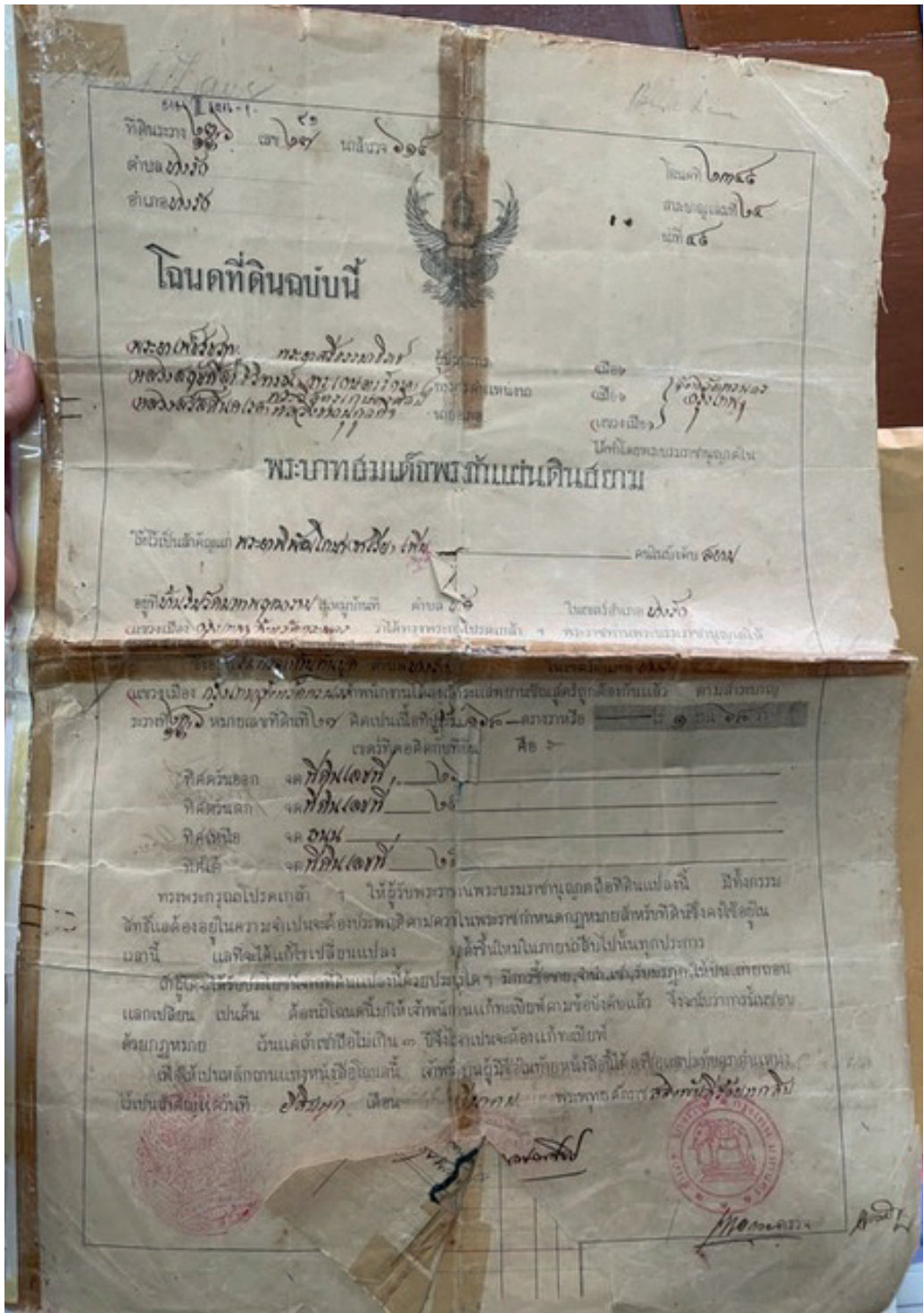


Figure 14. One of the deeds (photo: author).

11. On 2 July 1928, Lert Sreshthaputra (Phraya Pakdee Norasetr) mortgaged the land to Mr. Samuel Brighthouse.
12. On 27 July 1928, Lert Sreshthaputra (Phraya Pakdee Norasetr) redeemed the land from Mr. Samuel Brighthouse.
13. On 30 May 1946, Lert Sreshthaputra (Phraya Pakdee Norasetr) transferred the title to Khun Ying Sin Pakdee Noraset
14. On 26 July 1946, Khunying Sin Pakdee Noraset, executor of the estate of Lert Sreshthaputra, sold the land to Mr. Chuan Chavanich and Mrs. Manee Chavanich

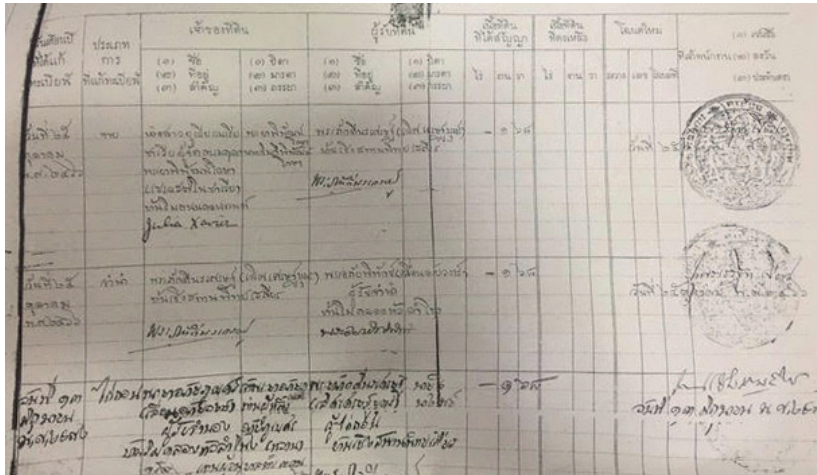


Figure 15. The successive transactions on the back of one of the deeds (photo: author).

### List of Transactions: Deed 3.

1. On 26 September 1923, the first transaction on the title deed was the transfer of title to Miss Julia Maria Xavier from Mrs. Kimkee Phipat Kosa, executor of the estate of her father Celestine W. Xaviar (Phraya Phipat Kosa)
2. On 25 October 1923, Miss Julia Maria Xavier sold the land to Lert Sreshthaputra (Phraya Pakdee Norasetr).
3. On 25 October 1923, Lert Sreshthaputra (Phraya Pakdee Norasetr) mortgaged the land to Phraya Aphai Phubet (Lueam Aphaiwong).
4. On 13 June 1929, Lert Sreshthaputra (Phraya Pakdee Norasetr) redeemed the mortgage to reclaim title from Lueam Aphaiwong (Phraya Aphai Phubet).
5. In June 1929, Lert Sreshthaputra (Phraya Pakdee Norasetr) mortgaged the land to R.D. Atkinson.
6. On 27 July 1943, Lert Sreshthaputra (Phraya Pakdee Norasetr) paid off the mortgage to R.D. Atkinson and regained title to the land.

7. On 30 May 1946, title to the land was inherited by Khunying Sin Pakdee Noraset, executor of the estate of Lert Sreshthaputra (Phraya Pakdee Norasetr) and her daughter Lursakdi.
8. On 26 July 1946, Khunying Sin Pakdee Noraset, executor of the estate of Lert Sreshthaputra (Phraya Pakdee Norasetr), sold the land to Mr. Chuan Chavanich and Mrs. Manee Chavanich.

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