

KRUNG THEP AT ONE HUNDRED : SCAPE AND GRID

by

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A would-be restorer of an uncharted cityscape rarely is able to do more than compose a pastiche from the leavings of keen, perforce alien eyewitnesses. So the following word-picture of centennial Bangkok has been pieced together from the fragmentary descriptions of the capital by several *farang* diplomats, merchants and missionaries resident in the city during the decade or so immediately after its centenary, in 1882.‡

Bangkok is built for about six miles on both sides of the noble river Chow Paya [sic; Chao Phraya] ... thirty miles from the mouth ... the downward current ... is very strong, but the rising tides force water back into the creeks and canals that intersect ... all over this semi-aquatic city, which, like the "Queen of the Adriatic", depends more on her water-ways ... than on streets of solid ground. The view of Bangkok from the river, and the scene on the river itself, are both very striking. [Figure 1]

From the centre of the broad deep stream stand out the tall masts of large ... steamers, their huge hulls towering far above the ... innumerable smaller ... native craft ... of every variety ... that ply between them and the shore ... Chinese junks ... moored by immense rattan cables ... also scores of steam-yachts ... The river ... is by no means a "silent highway" ... dozens of small skiffs are flitting about, "manned" by women ... barely seen beneath the broad-brimmed hats of palmleaves or straw, but whose voices are resonant in all directions, bargaining ... and disposing of their fruits and vegetables, their firewood, and varied up-country produce ... rice, sugar, salt, cotton, oil, dried fish, or dye-wood, as the case may be ... Here and there are ... little boats where John Chinaman sells ... a frugal meal of curried rice, boiled vegetables, bits of pork, or dried fish and cakes ... There are ... private pleasure-boats, shaped like gondolas, in which ... rowlocks are very high ... and the oarsman stands to his work ... with his face to the prow ... so that he has to push ... his oars through the water ... Boating is ... the only chance of getting a little fresh air, and nearly every one keeps a boat.

Along the shore ... in rows five or six deep—the inner row moored to the bank, and the outer ones connected with it by planks, or two or three bamboos lashed together, which serve as gangways—the native boats, with their deck-house covered in with a semicircular roof, under which the boatman and his family make their permanent home ... Thousands of the people live in floating houses ... lining both banks of the river ... They are but one story high ... built of ... light wood ... thatched with the leaves of the attap palm ... and placed in rafts of large bamboos, which rise and fall with the tide ... moored to

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‡ (Anonymous 1884a, Anonymous 1884b, Bacon 1892, Bock 1884, Bradley 1884, Caddy 1889, Cort 1884, Cort 1886, House 1884, Mrs. House 1884, McDonald 1884, Vincent 1884.)

the bank, or to ... large posts on each side driven deep into the muddy bed of the river ... These houses have some advantages over all others, for if neighbors are disagreeable or a fire breaks out the occupants have only to move off with the tide ... to some other spot ... Many of them are open in front with a veranda, and are shops ... Here you can purchase your supplies ... by stopping your boat and pointing out what you want in the wide open room before you ... There, in the way of dry goods, are bleached and unbleached and turkey-red muslins, Siamese waist-cloths and some fading calicoes. Here are a few boxes of tea, some native umbrellas, a bunch of peacock feathers, tigers' skins ... piles of coarse crockery, pieces of matting ... There ... a floating-house restaurant ... they have — pork steaks, ducks, fowls, hot rice and curry, dried fish and vegetables. [Figure 2]

Beyond these, on either bank ... stretches a wide expanse of the sloping roofs of the native houses ... relieved at short intervals by the glittering spires of temples ... or the pinnacles of the royal palaces, rearing their heads high above everything. There are said to be over 100 temples in the city ... and on a sunny day the effect of the glistening towers, many of them gilt to the very top, is very beautiful.

Really imposing as the view ... from the river is, the contrast on landing ... is very great.

Many roads have been constructed during the last few years, it is true ... but they are all below the flood-level ... the city being built on the edge of a great alluvial plain, which is inundated during the rainy season, so that the roads will have to be raised to be of any permanent advantage ... The main road ... which is several miles in length, is itself often partly under water during the south-west monsoon ... The streets are nearly all very narrow and crooked, and only adapted to the Siamese, who until lately never pretended to use carriages ... They are also very uneven, with here and there great holes, crossed by rough stepping stones, and during the highest tides are overflowed with water, sometimes knee-deep, for several hours each day ... The back lanes and bypaths ... are in a chronic state of filth, wet or dry ... In the city proper ... which is walled in ... are, however, a few wide, pleasant streets ... long enough to furnish six or seven miles of good driving. They are kept in tolerable repair ... daily swept ... in the dry season sprinkled ... to lay the dust, and at night lighted by lamps and patrolled by watchmen. [Figure 3]

The facilities for locomotion are ... insufficient ... Within the last year or two hacks have been running ... The carriages, kept for hire by a few Klings [Dravidians] and Malays, are generally in a most dilapidated state, while the horses are still worse.

The nobles ... have erected a great many handsome brick houses, which are planned by European architects, and are roomy and comfortable ... and some of them elegantly furnished with English, French, and Chinese furniture. In these houses may be seen beautiful things in great variety ... Some of the princes' palaces have marble and tile floors ... occasionally they have carpets ... All ... have beautiful gardens. Sometimes they are attached to the palaces, and sometimes they are off in another part of the city ... The rich ... have numerous slaves and attendants ... Every man of rank has at least

one band, if not two, one exclusively of native and the other exclusively of European instruments ... The Siamese prize their instruments very much, nor is there any shop in Bangkok where one can buy a set... The princes and noblemen all have the instruments for their bands made on their own premises by skilled workmen ... The missionaries, foreign consuls, merchants and wealthy Chinese have good, substantial dwellings ... on the banks of the river ... to avoid the not too savoury smells of the interior of the city ... and house-rents there are accordingly high ... Until lately the river frontage of palaces was nothing but ... boat-houses and servants' quarters; but now better ideas prevail, and good landings and graceful salas ... may be seen. [Figure 4]

The middle class dwell in houses built of wood, usually unpainted teak, and roofed with earthen tiles. They are small and illy ventilated, and here the people huddle together, from the parents to the children of the third and fourth generation ... They have very little furniture ... The lower class live in huts made of woven bamboo, and thatched with leaves ... Nearly all dwellings are built on posts ... which elevate them five or six feet from the ground, and are reached by ladders, which at night are often drawn up to prevent dogs or thieves coming into the house. But the very poor have ... huts made of palm leaves tied to a bamboo frame, and with ... the bare earth for a floor.

All ordinary Siamese houses ... have three rooms ... There is the common bedroom, an outer room where they sit during the day and receive their visitors, and the kitchen ... where ... is a rude box, filled with earth, where they build the fire and ... boil rice and make curry, and roast fish and plantains over the coals ... vegetables are seldom cooked at home, but are prepared by others and sold in the markets, or peddled about the streets. There they buy boiled sweet potatoes, green corn, and preserved fruits, curries, roasted fish ... peanuts and bananas, sliced pine-apples and melons, and squash ... Curry is made of all sorts of things, but is usually a combination of meat or fish, and vegetables ... The ingredients are chopped very fine, or pounded in a mortar, especially the red peppers, onions, and spices. The predominant flavor is red pepper, so hot and fiery that your mouth will smart and burn for half an hour after you have eaten it. Still, many of the curries are very good, and with steamed rice furnish a good meal ... The kitchen has no chimney, and the smoke finds its own way out ... There is but little furniture, except the rice-pots, a kettle, and perhaps a frying-pan, and baskets of various shapes and sizes, one pair being daubed within and without with pitch and used to carry water. There is a little stool ... on which they place the curry and fish and the sliced vegetables, while those who squat around it, each with a bowl of rice on the floor before them, which they replenish from a dish or basket near by, or from the rice-pot on the fire-place. The rice-pot is of coarse earthenware, round and bulging, with a small mouth and a lid. They cost but a trifle, and are easily broken, but the rice cooked in them is the most delicious ... They eat with their fingers, very few having so much even as a spoon ... The kitchen floors are nearly all made of split bamboos, with great cracks between, through which they pour all the slops and push the dirt ... Near the door are several large earthen jars for water, which are filled from the river by the women or servants ... and

here they wash their feet before they enter the house. They dip the water with a gourd or a cocoanut-shell. They also use brass basins and trays a great deal. [Figure 5]

The outer room is barren enough, with perhaps a mat for guests to sit upon, and a tray from which all are served with betel ... The natives consider it an insult if they enter another's house and are not invited to eat betel, and it is equally impolite to refuse the proffered cud. Indeed, it occupies so important a place in the economy of their social life that a wedding is called ... literally "betel-tray", because it heads the procession of gifts which are laid at the feet of the bride's parents by the bridegroom ... Betel-chewing disfigures the mouth wonderfully, causing the teeth to protrude and blacken, and the lips and tongue to crack ... The cud they chew so persistently is a combination of areca-nut, cera-leaf, lime, tobacco, camphor, and turmeric. It is ... indulged in by all classes. It is given ... to the priests as well as to the ... beggars ... It costs almost as much as their food, especially among the poor. I have seen it in the mouths of unweaned children; and old folks no longer capable of chewing, pound it in a mortar to reduce it to the desired pulpiness, or have younger jaws and better teeth masticate it for them.

The bedroom is where things accumulate. A ... straw mat, or perhaps an ox hide or two on the floor, with brick-shaped pillows stuffed with cotton, or a block of wood ... and you have the ordinary Siamese bed. In families of not the very poorest, you sometimes find long narrow mattresses stuffed with tree-cotton ... and over it is suspended a mosquito curtain of unbleached cotton.

The Siamese are great bathers. Several times daily they may be seen splashing in the rivers or canals, or pouring water over themselves from jars set by the doorway ... they use neither soap nor towels ... to complete the toilet they smear the body with turmeric ... Many have ... only a waist-cloth which they wear when they go to bathe. When they come up out of the water they change it for a dry one ... The dress of the Siamese is very simple and comfortable, consisting of a waist-cloth, jacket, and scarf, and sometimes a hat and sandals ... The people are extremely fond of jewelry, and often their gold chains and rings are the only adornment the body can boast.

Thus ... house-life ... among the lower classes ... not among those who have come in contact with ... foreigners ... is very simple ... Housekeeping and needlework form so small a part of female labor here that much opportunity is given for out-of-door work ... Women enjoy greater liberty than in almost any other Oriental land. You meet them everywhere; and in the bazaars and markets nearly all the buying and selling is done by them ... They are seen performing all sorts of labor ... It is difficult for a stranger to distinguish a woman of the lower classes from a man, as in dress, manner, appearance and occupation they seem so much alike.

Of the city's half million people, perhaps nearly one-half are Chinese, Hindoos, Malays, and other foreigners, of whom less than three hundred are Europeans. The steamers that come from China now make Swatow their final port of departure, that place being the chief centre of Chinese emigration ... No account of the number of immigrants is kept ... so it is impossible to state with any accuracy how many arrive, but it must now

reach over 20,000 annually, and is probably increasing. There is some return emigration from Siam, but it cannot be compared to the immigration. The whole trade of the country now falls into the hands of the Chinese, indeed it would be a difficult matter now to find a Siamese merchant or shopkeeper.

The Chinese are very clannish, and settling together have given to some portions of the city quite a "Celestial" appearance. Their streets are close and dark, some of them covered overhead, and filled with real Chinese odors, principally onions ... Chinese liquor ... and opium ... Pigs, dogs, cats and children throng these thoroughfares; there is no danger from horses or carriages, the streets are far too narrow to admit them ... The houses in the markets are so made that the front can all be taken down in the daytime, and the whole inner room and its contents exposed ... If they have counters, they fill nearly the whole room, which is often not more than ten by eight feet, and ... the merchant sits in the midst of his goods. The whole family ... lives in or back of the store ... and often the baby's hammock is swung from the ceiling, and the little one is cared for while customers are waited on. All sorts of trades are carried on in sight of every passer-by ... At a restaurant or bakery ... you see the inmates prepare the food or cake before your very eyes. The blacksmiths and tanners are hammering for dear life; and the tailors cutting and sewing, but always on the alert to sell a needle or a half dozen buttons ... In the barber-shops ... the ... Chinaman ... sits on a high stool ... and has his ears picked, his head and eyebrows shaved, and his eyelashes and beard pulled out ... On all sides are Chinese joss-houses, Chinese carpenters' shops, Chinese cabinet works, Chinese carriage manufacturers; wherever there is any work going on it is sure to be under the sign of a Chinese proprietor, though here and there may be seen a Siamese pottery works, where the brittle portable ovens, pots, and water-bottles are produced ... In happy confusion may be seen Chinese pawnbrokers' shops; Siamese and Chinese eating-houses ... street-stalls, where John Chinaman offers his home-made lemonade, or his dish of boiled vegetables in which onions form the leading ingredient, with a choice of bits of fat pork or lean duck, or where the Siamese purveyor tempts the passer-by with a mixed collection of rice and cakes, mussels and shrimps, and dried or stinking fish ... Chinese duck farms, where the ducklings are reared from the egg, and find plenty of rubbish to rout about in, if not much food on which to get fat; Chinese drug-shops ... dram-shops, where ... the liquor-jars ... are out in the street, and the people stop and drink ... Native arrack ... made of molasses ... costs but little ... The home production is not equal to the demand, and ... liquor is imported from China, Batavia, Singapore, and Europe ... Eating and smoking opium are also on the increase, and the law which threatens all consumers of it with confiscation of property and death, is not now enforced. There is a weed ... (which I think is Indian hemp), grown abundantly in Siam, and those who are too poor to buy opium use this instead ... It would be hard to find a Siamese who did not use tobacco in some form. The men and boys nearly all smoke and some of the women. All chew the weed with their betel and some use it as snuff ... More numerous, perhaps, than anything else, are the ubiquitous gambling-houses ... probably many hundred in Bangkok ... with a Chinese ... theatre, close at hand ... The gambling establishments are all in the hands of the Chinese ... the master-gamblers

of Siam ... Gambling, like many other things in Siam, is a monopoly, and the government sells to the highest bidder the privilege of licensing and controlling all such establishments ... They afford no small amount of revenue ... Men, women and little children all frequent the gambling-places. Cards and dice are both used. The lottery monopoly is also in the hands of the Chinese ... The gambling-houses ... are ... large bamboo sheds, with an attap roof, devoid of furniture, and many of them without even a floor, only the bare earth, over which are laid mats for the players to sit on ... Play usually begins late in the afternoon, and lasts half the night ... When tired of gambling the Siamese adjourn to the neighbouring theatre, where they spend an hour or two watching the ... performance ... We sometimes ... hear the deafening peal of the gong ... the grating notes of ... various stringed instruments, then all together with ... shrill, falsetto voices above the din of the multitude, and passing on to where the crowd is so dense you can hardly force your way through, you will see a stage thrown across the street, and a band of Chinese ... performing some wonderful tragedy, with both action and voice raised to the highest pitch.

There is also a Mussulman's Square ... where the Mohammedan Hindoos [sic] live and die. Their homes are built of brick, and the little stalls of shops are filled with many curious and useful things. All are merchants or peddlers. They have mosques and retain their old religion and old home habits as much as possible.

Next to gambling-hells, theatres, and perhaps dram-shops, the structures which are most numerous ... are the temples ... Bangkok may be termed the City of Temples ... There are between one and two hundred temples in the city ... No one can be long in Siam without being astonished at the large part which the wat [temple] occupies as a social centre in the every-day life of the people ... The kings and nobles ... and the ... people spend vast sums ... on these temples ... They occupy the pleasantest parts of the city ... There are some grand old temples ... hidden among the sacred groves and lotus ponds, and others newly built; or repaired, shining in all the glory of gilt, fresh plaster, and Chinese paint ... A Siamese wat ... consists of a number of buildings scattered about a large park-like enclosure ... at the entrance of the enclosure, generally near the boat-landing on the river, you ... find a ... rest-house, called ... by the Siamese sala. You pass the sala and enter an area, generally ... of several acres ... laid out with trees and ornamental shrubbery. Here are shady ... well-swept ... walks, sometimes paved with marble; fruit- and flower-gardens ... Passing the first, possibly the second, court, you reach by a flight of steps the wide terrace on which stands the principal temple ... This is ... a large ... hall, built of brick thickly coated with white plaster ... The ... roof ... is resplendent with glazed tiles. The roofs, gable-ends, doors and windows (without glass) are of solid timber, covered ... with intricately-cut cornices, intersecting mouldings and fantastic embellishments ... elaborately carved and heavily gilded—an art in which the Siamese have considerable skill ... Entering this building, you see an altar ... It contains ... figures of Buddha ... together with ... wax candles, incense-tapers, gold and silver tinsel ornaments, offerings of fruit and flowers ... Pagodas, or sacred spires—detached pyramidal piles of solid masonry, frequently reaching

a great height—are always found in connection with the temples. These ... contain some relic of Buddha, and are sacred to his memory ... Each wat has also its ... preaching hall. Each wat has also its library, containing the sacred books of Buddhist scriptures ... But a ... wat is not merely a place of worship; most of all it is a ... monastery ... There are often several hundred inmates in a large wat ... The ... priests ... have usually rows of little cells, almost bare of furniture except the coverlets and pillows and mosquito-nets ... Properly, a Buddhist monk possesses his own eight articles — viz. three robes, a girdle, an alms-bowl, a razor, a needle and a water-strainer, this last that he may not unwittingly in drinking destroy animal life ... Priests are easily recognised by their yellow robes and shaven heads ... It is said that there are ten thousand ... in Bangkok ... and one can easily believe it, for you meet them everywhere, and there are hundreds of temples and monasteries to shelter ... them ... They live on the charity of the people ... Every morning the streets of Bangkok are crowded ... with yellow-robed ... priests ... paddled around with their ... alms-bowl ... from door to door.

When Bangkok was founded in 1782 the king's palaces and all the principal buildings were erected on the left bank of the river, but now the royal palaces of both the first and second kings are on the other side ... within the walls of the city ... The walls are fifteen feet high and twelve broad, and surrounding the city proper extend some four and a half miles. This wall is pierced by sixteen large gates and forty-seven smaller ones, and defended by sixteen octagonal forts, two stories high ... It is estimated that the city walls enclose one hundred thousand souls; this leaves four or five hundred thousand outside, and if the city were attacked or besieged, it would be impossible for such a multitude ever to find shelter behind the gates ... Within the city walls are palace walls ... about a mile in circumference ... thick and high, with double doors and ... forts, and in this most carefully guarded enclosure are the grand royal palaces of the king and queen ... the audience-halls, the mint, arsenal, halls of justice, museum, royal chapel, and separated from them by an inner wall is the royal harem ... that "City of Women" ... which is in itself a compact little town, with several streets, a bazaar, a temple, pleasure-gardens and the homes of the numerous wives, sisters and other relatives of the king ... The old palace ... of His Majesty ... has long since become inadequate ... and the present king has just completed the new royal residence ... The style is a mixture of different schools of European architecture, the picturesque and characteristic Siamese roof, however, being retained. The internal fittings ... are most elaborate ... the most costly furniture having been imported from London ... and Paris ... and illuminated with electric lights ... One of the features of the palace is a large and well-stocked library ... all the leading European and American periodicals and newspapers being regularly taken in ... The palace of the second king, ... is also European in many of its appointments, with mirrors, pictures and English and French furniture ... The dress and habits of the court-circles have undergone an entire revolution within the last few years. The men wear neat linen, collar and cravat; an English dress-coat, with the native p'anoong arranged much like knickerbockers; shoes and stockings. The court-dress of a Siamese lady consists of a neat, closely-fitted jacket, finished at throat and wrists with frills of white muslin and lace, and a p'anoong similar to that worn by the men.

... The work which, in popular estimation at least, will make His Majesty's reign most memorable ... is the completion ... as an especial work of royal piety ... of the great royal temple ... for the Emerald Buddha, the palladium of the capital ... after having been exactly 100 years in course of construction ... On the 21st of April, 1882, the ceremony of final dedication ... of this magnificent pile of buildings ... was performed ... to give the city its crowning glory ... on the hundredth anniversary of the capital of Siam ... Improvements have not ended here, and the celebration of the centenary of the city was marked by the inauguration of many reforms, many of which are personified in the public buildings then commenced or already erected for their administration ... Of the public buildings ... perhaps the most important is the new Court of Justice ... Besides a new era in the administration of law, the centenary of Bangkok marks a fresh advance in the education of the people. A splendid college—quite a palace in appearance, and with every modern appliance—has been built ... and will shortly be opened ... A fine building has just been erected as the "St. Martin's-le-Grand" of Bangkok, and to facilitate the work of the post-office all the houses in the city have been numbered ... Postage-stamps have been ordered from England, and ... a batch of twenty telegraph clerks ... installed, ready for the completion of the lines from Saigon to Bangkok, and arrangements are practically complete for adopting the European postal and telegraphic system ... Bangkok has few sanitary laws, and such as have been enacted are seldom strictly enforced; yet ... the sanitary condition of Bangkok is ... receiving great attention, and measures are being gradually adopted to mitigate the severity of the fearful epidemics of cholera, which in times past have from time to time devastated the country.

Not one half century ago Siam was sealed against the entrance of ... the dreaded ... Europeans ... Chinese junks ... laden with stones ... were sunk at the mouth of the river, and chains stretched from shore to shore to prevent the ... "fire-ships" ... steaming up to Bangkok ... To-day she is in treaty relations with all ... countries, and ... now, large steamers at high tide cross the bar and sail on and on through a wide, deep, open river and cast anchor in the very heart of the ... capital ... In the city ... there are large business-houses conducted by foreign merchants ... Steam rice-mills are developing rice-culture: steam saw-mills are creating a large trade in valuable lumber ... Good inducements are offered to foreigners to enter the various departments of trade, and full protection is given ... Chinese are immigrating in large numbers ... Other nationalities are flowing in across the borders, and through all the open ports, and are working changes, the end of which we do not yet see.

It is a notable fact that ... the Chinese ... fare better in every respect than the ordinary natives ... Their privileges are greater, and their taxes less oppressive. Every Chinaman must pay a triennial poll-tax ... As a proof that this tax has been paid they must wear a

cord around the wrist fastened with ... gum ... and stamped with a government seal ... They are not drafted into the army, and are not subject to the beck and call of every officer and nobleman in the unlimited ranks above them ... The Chinese have been in Siam since time immemorial, and have increased ... There is no census taken ... and even the government has no positive means of knowing the number of inhabitants. But ... every steamer and sailing craft from China is swarming with ... Celestials ... Chinese of wealth often become favorites with the rulers and receive titles of nobility, and these noblemen in return present their daughters to their majesties ... Although a Chinaman may have left a wife in his native land, that does not prevent his taking as many as he can support. The first Siamese wife is supreme, and rules the many-sided household ... The children ... cultivate their hair in queue style, and wear the same fashion of dress which their Chinese ancestors wore centuries ago ... A Chinese woman is rarely seen in Siam ... The Chinese element in Siam is a powerful one. No other race can compete with it, not even excepting the Caucasian ... They have their temples and joss-houses, their religious fetes, processions, and festivals. Their holidays are recognised by the Government ... Their secret societies are many and formidable ... the natives of each province [of China] holding together and working to promote the interests of their own particular clan. They have frequent quarrels ... which sometimes threatens the peace of the kingdom and often disturbs that of the city ... We find the Chinese in every business. They are ... industrious and enterprising, and do most of the work and control much of the wealth of Bangkok, outside of what is in the hands of the kings and nobles ... In the days when Siam had a sailing fleet of merchantmen the owners were principally Chinese, as were also the shippers and crews. Even when commanded by a European captain, the supercargo on board was a Chinaman and had chief control. Since steamships have been introduced we find that the owners and agents of some of these are Chinamen. The saw-mills and rice-mills worked by muscle power are all owned by Chinese, and since the introduction of steam-mills they are not slow to adopt these modern improvements, so that now several steam saw-mills and rice-mills are owned by enterprising Chinamen ... They are ... gardeners, shopkeepers, carpenters, bricklayers, tailors, sailors, shoemakers, blacksmiths, fishermen and washermen ... The manufacture of gold and silver jewellery, which is carried on to a large extent in Bangkok, is entirely in the hands of the Chinese ... All the mills employ Chinese coolies; all cargo-boats for loading and unloading ships are manned by these coolies. Europeans prefer the Chinese for servants: they are cleanly and quick to learn, frugal in their habits, utilizing everything ... As gardeners the Chinese are very successful ... Bangkok is situated upon a plain which is almost at sea level; there are no hills or mountains to relieve the eye in any direction. This plain is covered with rice fields, vegetable gardens, fruit and spice orchards, and gardens of betel, cocoanut, banana, and other tropical trees; orange, mango, coffee, and nutmeg ... The land is made sufficiently dry by throwing it up in large beds ten to twelve feet high ... The deep ditches between have a supply of water even in the dry season ... The gardener lives within the premises, his ... hut guarded by a multitude of dogs and a ... stench of pigsty ... The Chinese do not cultivate the paddy fields to any great extent, but buy the rice from the producers and bring it to the Bangkok markets. The seri-leaf ...

is cultivated with great care ... in the betel-gardens ... This leaf ... bright green, tender and juicy ... covered with a pink lime paste and a little tobacco and betel-nut added ... rolled up cross-wise and chewed ... is used ... extensively in Siam ... Rotten fish is used as a fertiliser, and consequently the breezes which blow over these gardens are not "spicy breezes", but ... very offensive, obliging one in passing to suspend respiration for a time ... But if you are so fortunate as to be gliding through ... canals in other parts of the city, where the flower-gardens and orange trees are blooming in beauty and fragrance, every sense is filled with delight, and one could almost wish they might drift through such enchanting ways forever.

Is this anecdotal account accurate?

To censure diplomats, merchants and missionaries for leaving vivid impression instead of balanced assessment would be hypercritical; still, many particulars in their narrative whistle for whys. A fine example of such a failing is the presentation of betel-chewing among the Siamese: condemned as a disgusting habit or an expensive luxury, and scorned: 'They say "any dog can have white teeth", inferring [sic] that only those who know enough to use betel can have beautiful black ones' (Cort 1886). None seems to have troubled to discover why betel-chewing had been ritualised. I fronted a friendly pharmacist knowledgeable about the traditional drugs of Thailand to get at the truth: the active constituents of the betel-cud mitigate dysentery and repel intestinal parasites as well as having antiseptic and tonic properties (Mulholland 1978, Fluckiger and Hanbury 1879). Small wonder, then, that extensive, carefully cultivated betel gardens surrounded Bangkok, there was brisk trade in the constituents of the betel-cud, and each household had a betel-service comprising a box, a tray and a spittoon, to accept the outpour from the salivary glands which are activated wonderously when chewing; indeed, the betel-service of the rich was fashioned in gold. How different would be our informants' report of the pervasive practice of betel-chewing had they known of its benefits?

There is no question that the anecdotal record is accented peculiarly and portrays centennial Bangkok in caricature. The question is whether the caricature is incisive or merely grotesque. This might be assessed by comparison with the reminiscences of keen observers at other times. We may do this uncommon thing. Anthologies comprising eyewitness accounts of Bangkok a generation either side of its centennial have been compiled (Sternstein 1976). As it happens, the three anecdotal representations of the city, spanning the early nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, lay in sensible sequence. There is nothing freakish in the description of centennial Bangkok; indeed, information is given about aspects of ordinary life which receive scant attention in the earlier and later anthologies. However, an incongruity did show up.

The population of Bangkok in the 1880s commonly was estimated as one half million, though a few thought one million nearer the mark. A generation earlier, in the 1850s, the population of the city was said to approximate 350,000. During the opening decade of the twentieth century, the population of the city and its suburbs was thought to approximate one half million, though some reported the number as not more than 400,000 and others as not less than 600,000. One half million hearts in centennial Bangkok may be judged excessive,

since the population of the capital had burgeoned since the late 1880s. How excessive is the estimate cannot be gauged from the anecdotage or by regression from the first 'census' of 1909 which returned 628,675 for the city and its suburbs; a figure subsequently reduced to 500,000 in the light of the census of 1920 which counted only 345,000 in the 'city proper'. A centennial count is wanted.

In a reply to congratulations tendered him on his thirtieth birthday, 21 September 1883, His Majesty King Chulalongkorn referred to the local post:

The post-office now delivers letters with regularity throughout the capital and its suburbs. The use of it has surprisingly exceeded our expectations, as we did not think that Siamese people would write so many letters. (*Siam Weekly Advertiser*, 22 September 1883)

Postal services had been initiated a few months before. Collection boxes had been set up in all parts of the city; their bottoms reportedly made of sandalwood 'to impart fragrance to the missives, and thereby cultivate a taste for letters' (Cort 1886). (In fact, the anonymity of the post triggered an avalanche of abuse addressed to certain nobles, and also the forwarding of heavy packages of trash for which delivery charges were due.) Each house had affixed to its face a small board bearing a number, and a roll of names and addresses had been compiled to facilitate mail deliveries; to this end, also, distinctive surnames were to be assumed by each family.

The roll was recovered. Its contents exceeded my expectations; though, in retrospect, my hopes should have been high. If the progressive policies of King Chulalongkorn—described at the time as 'one of the most advanced sovereigns of Eastern Asia' (Anonymous 1884a)—were to be implemented efficiently, a dossier of information about the kingdom was needed. Compilation of the roll of postal addresses afforded an opportunity to gather intelligence. The chance was taken.

According to the postal roll, the population of Krung Thep, comprising the city of Bangkok and a wide area surrounding, roughly thrice the area shown on figure 6, was approximately 169,000 in 1882 (see table 1).

TABLE 1
THE POPULATION OF KRUNG THEP 1882
(INCLUDES THE CITY OF BANGKOK)

Thai	136,000
Chinese	27,000
Malays	4,000
Indians	1,000
Other Asians	1,000
Westerners	300
Total	169,300

Figures are rounded because only estimates could be made for several subpopulations (for example, monks and harem-dwellers) omitted from the postal roll.

Annotations on the "Map of the city of Bangkok" describe sizeable tracts as

Orchards of Coconuts, Durians, Oranges, Mangoostiens, Betel, Ceri, etc. with numerable small canals and densely inhabited

OR

All this tract is occupied by Gardens, and Orchards of Coccoanuts, Durians, Pomeatoes, Oranges, Betel, Ceri, etc. being densely inhabited and well watered by innumerable canals generally of small size.

According to the postal roll fully one fifth of household heads in the 'city' worked the land. Of those who did not work the land better than two fifths was non-Thai, which fraction is not too far from the anecdotal nearly half non-Thai in the population, albeit the visible population only, of centennial Bangkok.

A number of eyewitness descriptions of Bangkok from the early and mid-1800s include estimates of the population of the city subdivided into nationalities. Although the total populations reported differ remarkably, the non-Thai fraction strays only fractionally from two thirds, and the Chinese consistently outnumber the Thai. 'It may seem strange that the Chinese outnumbered the Thai in the Thai capital city, but . . . consensus in this regard of all writers on Siam during the first three reigns [1782-1851] cannot be questioned' (Skinner 1962) and may be accounted for:

The members of the court itself . . . and many of the immediate retainers were Thai; but most of the slaves serving the court were non-Thai . . . Physicians, astrologers, artisans, and others providing skilled services were mainly foreigners . . . Chinese predominating. Bangkok, furthermore, because of the heavy mercantile interests of the first three Jakkri kings, was somewhat peculiar among oriental capitals in having a large commercial sector in its population, and the great bulk of this group was Chinese. The Thai of course, were not free to move to the capital, even if attracted. The great majority of their number were clients or retainers and slaves of patrons and masters in the elite class. Even the freemen attached to those aristocrats and nobles with duties in the capital were mainly left on the landed estates of their patrons in the provinces. Under these circumstances, Chinese immigrants, whose main port of entry was Bangkok and who remained entirely outside the systems of patronage, corvee, and slavery, readily filled most of the demands of the court and of the capital's trade. (Skinner 1862)

Although this account is more an argument than an explanation, and embodies several questionable points, it is approvable. Indeed, Bangkok may have been more a Chinese than a Thai settlement when Phya Tak, later King Taksin, astutely abandoned Ayutthaya, the former capital, and 'constructed for himself a palace, adequate to the necessity of the times' (Bock 1884), on the west bank of the Chao Phraya opposite the citadel-to-be on the east bank. The site of the unmade citadel was occupied by a rich Chinese merchant who, together with a considerable community of Chinese, was invited to move to an uninhabited area (Wenk 1968) immediately beyond the walls of the new citadel by Rama I, successor to King Taksin. (There appears to be no supporting evidence for this move being 'commanded' [Pramoj 1971], or 'requested and adequate compensation paid' [Chakrabongse 1960].) Considerable though the community of Chinese invited to move may have been, it should not be inferred that the whole, or even the greater part, of the Chinese community in Bangkok was relocated, or that the Chinese invited to move actually had no choice. The so-called Chinese community was, in reality, a congeries of different Chinese groups, themselves vying, violently at times, with one another. A rich Chinese merchant and his considerable community of Chinese cannot be construed to refer to more than one among several strong groups of Chinese; the one which won the choice com-

mercial location along the Chao Phraya river downstream and immediately beyond the walls of the new citadel, now part of the area known as Sam Peng, the Chinatown of Bangkok. Why was this choice commercial area uninhabited? (Actually the land was under fruit trees.) Fortress Bangkok had guarded the riverine approach to the capital Ayutthaya, approximately one hundred kilometres upstream. Sam Peng lay in the line of fire downstream (figure 8). When Bangkok succeeded Ayutthaya as capital, its riverine approach was guarded by forts near the mouth of the Chao Phraya. What enabled the Chinese group relocated at Sam Peng to claim their new quarters? Possibly this Chinese group had distinguished itself in assisting King Taksin (himself born of a Teochiu father and a Thai mother) in reassembling the Thai kingdom following the fall of Ayutthaya, or had found especial favour with Rama I who encouraged the Chinese, abetting even their illegal migration from China, to develop the commerce of his kingdom.

Throughout the first three reigns, the development of the kingdom was closely associated with the expansion of state trading and royal monopolies, in which endeavour the tributary relationship with China and the Chinese in Thailand, residents of Bangkok especially, figured prominently. Rama IV (1851-1868) 'mounted the throne ... when European imperialism was tearing Asia to pieces', but Thailand 'preserved her independence when by the end of the nineteenth century all the other states of South-East Asia had come under European control' (Hall 1960). His Majesty initiated 'the wise policy of compounding with the advance of Western civilization, instead of resisting it' (Crosby 1945) by concluding the Treaty of Friendship and Commerce with Great Britain in 1855. The main feature of that treaty was the fixing of duties on imports and exports by British merchants. This was no small concession; in the words of Sir John Bowring, the British negotiator, it demanded 'a complete revolution in the financial system of the country, as it destroys many of the present and most fruitful sources of revenue' (Bowring 1857). State trading was abolished. 'The conclusion of this treaty ... speedily attracted the attention of other powers, and ... similar treaties ... were made with France and the United States in 1856, Denmark and the Hanseatic cities in 1858, Portugal in 1859, Holland in 1860 ... Prussia in 1862 ... [and] in 1868 ... with Belgium, Italy, and Norway and Sweden' (Hall 1960). As a result, the economy expanded and so too did the Chinese community; however,

While Bangkok itself absorbed ever increasing numbers of Chinese, their proportion in the city, if anything, declined. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the Thai were progressively released from corvée duties, patronage ties, and slavery, and with their new freedom of movement they migrated into Bangkok in ever greater numbers, even as the Chinese ... the Thai population grew apace with the Chinese, and up until the First World War the number of Thai were equal or close to that of the Chinese. (*Skinner 1962*)

In truth, the Thai did not have to wait until 'the last quarter of the nineteenth century' to be 'progressively released from corvée duties, patronage ties, and slavery'. The obligation of client to patron had been progressively eased since the reign of Rama II (1809-1829) when corvée was reduced from six to three months a year. More importantly, clients had successfully side-stepped formal, local obligations always, but particularly since the reign of Rama III (1829-1851) when taxation reforms were introduced which encouraged payment in specie in lieu of corvée. Too, only male clients from the age of 20 were obliged to serve; which circumstance must partially account for the great number of women 'performing all sorts of labor' in the

capital; the fact that women enjoyed 'greater liberty than in almost any other Oriental land'; and the commonness of intermarriage with males of different nationality, particularly with Chinese. The Thai migrated to Bangkok 'in ever greater numbers' long before 'the last quarter of the nineteenth century' and long before 'the First World War the number of Thai were equal or close to that of the Chinese': in 1882, Bangkok held more Thai than Chinese.

The reportage about centennial Bangkok makes little reference to the distribution of the population other than that certain sections had a 'Celestial appearance'. From the postal roll it is clear that the population of centennial Bangkok was aligned strictly along reticulated waterways and the few roadways in a meshwork; here tightly drawn, there loosely made. Thai were everywhere. Chinese were as widely distributed as the Thai though less uniformly; their distribution, in fact, is described rather nicely by the pattern of population density shown on figure 9. Two thirds of the Chinese resided immediately east of the Chao Phraya river: little less than one third were in Sam Peng (if this quarter is delimited generously as the whole of the area along the river between the southern stretches of the Ong Ang and Phadung Krung Kasem canals); nearly one fifth were within the walls of the citadel, a goodly number being adjacent to the walls of the Grand Palace itself; one tenth lined the river south of Sam Peng; and others fronted the waterways and 'roadways' north of the citadel. The Chinese west of the Chao Phraya favored major waterways, particularly the river bank.

Malays, Indians and Westerners—the other national groups of size—nested in the more accessible parts of the city. The largest nest was along the river immediately south of Sam Peng: half the Westerners and more than one third of the Malays and the Indians were here. A second concentration in the heart of Sam Peng held one quarter of the Westerners and the Indians, but relatively few Malays. A third nest was along the left bank of the river opposite and south of the Grand Palace: here were one third of the Indians and one quarter of the Malays, but few Westerners. A fourth nucleus north of the citadel along the Chao Phraya held one quarter of the Malays, but relatively few Indians or Westerners. Pure ethnic stands were few and small: the two such stands of any size each comprised a troop of Vietnamese mercenaries charged with the operation of heavy artillery. The gathering together of members of different national groups reflected a common concern with trade.

Although trade was a major activity for each of the several major ethnic groups in centennial Bangkok, the membership of each group engaged in a wide range of occupations. There was a certain occupational specialization within national groups, but no occupational segregation, notwithstanding contemporary accounts to the contrary.

In his commercial report for 1882, Her Majesty's Acting Agent and Counsel-General in Siam, informed Parliament:

The whole trade of the country now falls into the hands of the Chinese, indeed it would be a difficult matter now to find a Siamese merchant or shopkeeper. (*Newman 1883*)

This was nonsense. Even the large fraction of the Thai population of Bangkok engaged in trade which is shown in table 4 is a considerable understatement. For in addition to the many women trading in the bazaars and markets and along the innumerable waterways, the Thai wives of Chinese shopkeepers (few Chinese women were in centennial Bangkok) minded the