



RUSSIAN-THAI RELATIONS: HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL ASPECTS¹

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Personal contacts constitute an essential sphere of bilateral relations. Covering a broad range of activities, from exchanges in the spheres of art and culture to what we call now “people’s diplomacy”, these contacts enrich and give a human character to official relations existing between nations. Russian-Thai personal relations present an outstanding example of that axiom.

Over a hundred years ago personal friendship between two monarchs, Tsar Nicholas II of Russia and King Chulalongkorn of Siam, laid the foundation for the advanced and mutually beneficial cooperation between the two nations. Since then, mutual interest in learning more about the culture and history of each has been steadily growing.

A long tradition of Thai studies exists in Russia. The Thai language, history, geography, economy are taught in a number of leading universities, such as Moscow State University, St Petersburg State University, Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO University), the Far Eastern State University in Vladivostok and some others. Russian academics specializing in Thai studies activity conduct research into the past and present of the Kingdom of Thailand. Scientific works by such researchers as Yuri Plum and Lev Morev on the Thai language, Boris Melnichenko, Valentina Dolnikova, Elena Fomicheva, Irina Lipilina on Thai history and literature, Alexander Kornev on Thai Buddhism and others, have contributed greatly to the spread of competent knowledge about Thailand in Russia. In particular, B. Melnichenko’s *Russia and Siam* as well as the works of O. Deshpande *Siamese Art of XIV-XIX centuries in the Hermitage* and E. Ivanova’s *Essays on the culture of Thais in Thailand* helped greatly in preparing of the present article.

Among historical sources used in this article are the collection of Archival Documents on the Russian-Thai relations (1863–1917) and the Diary of Prince Esper Ukhtomsky, a tutor and travelling companion of the future Russian Tsar Nicholas II, containing first-hand information about the visit of the Crown Prince Nicholas to Siam in 1891.

¹ This article is an edited version of the lecture delivered by H. E. Dr Y. D. Ostrovenko at the Siam Society on 8 April 2004.



A collection of historical documents (in Russian and in Thai) was simultaneously published in Russia and Thailand on the occasion of the 100th Anniversary of the establishment of the Russian-Thai diplomatic relations by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and State Archives of the two countries, the Russian Federation and the Kingdom of Thailand.

As early as in the late 1870s King Chulalongkorn of Thailand on numerous occasions expressed his wish to establish permanent diplomatic relations with Russia. Russian naval officers whose ships periodically came to Bangkok carried to the Russian Tsar the first royal letters containing a clear intention of the Siamese government to develop bilateral trade, diplomatic and cultural cooperation with Russia. Those officers were also among the first Russians who brought the vision of Siam to the eyes of the Russian public. Their descriptions of magnificent Thai temples and shrines, covered with gold and glittering in the sun, as well as the perception of Bangkok as the “the Venice of Asia”, were reflected in a variety of articles published in leading Russian magazines, and attracted attention of both specialists and the general Russian public.

A real breakthrough in the bilateral relations was made later by the visit of the heir to the Imperial throne Tsarevich Nicholas, the son of the then reigning Tsar Alexander III, to Siam in 1891. It was a part of the eastern voyage of the Tsarevich who was familiarizing himself with Asia and Asian affairs on the recommendation of his father, Alexander III. Notwithstanding its unofficial status, the visit gave a great impulse to the advancement of relations between the two countries and in fact marked the beginning of close and long-lasting personal friendship between the future Tsar Nicholas II and King Chulalongkorn, and in a broader sense between the peoples of Russia and Thailand.

The Russian Crown Prince and his entourage were welcomed in Siam with all due honours and utmost warmth. Prince Ukhtomsky wrote in his diary that “from books we knew vaguely about the hospitality of the Court of Siam. What we get to see today surpasses the imagination”². King Chulalongkorn personally took care of the visiting Russian Crown Prince and awarded him with the Order of Chakri. The King hosted festivities in honour of the Tsarevich both in Bangkok and at the Bang Pa In Palace and personally saw him off at the end of his visit.

Several months later a captain of a Russian naval ship delivered a letter of thanks from Alexander III to King Chulalongkorn together with the Order of

² Prince Esper Esperovitch Uchtomskij, *Czarevitch Nicolas of Russia in Siam and Saigon*. p. 31.

St Andrew³ bestowed by the Tsar upon the Siamese Monarch—the first in the number of Russian decorations received by members of the Thai royal family.

The visit of Prince Damrong, brother of King Chulalongkorn and Director-General of the National Department of Education of Siam, to Russia was the next step in the development of relations between the two countries. Prince Damrong, well known in Thailand as the “father of the Thai history”, also became an active participant in the process of establishment and development of the Russian-Siamese relations. He came to Russia in November 1891 and was received by Alexander III in Livadia—a gorgeous imperial summer residence on the Black Sea. The prince delivered a letter and the Order of Chakri which had been sent to the Russian Tsar by the King of Siam. In his letter King Chulalongkorn reconfirmed the intention to further develop friendly relations with Russia.

Starting in 1891, official visits and personal contacts including the exchange of correspondence between the Russian imperial family and the Siamese royal family became frequent and played an important role in the development of relations between the two countries. In 1893 Russia started to lend its support to Siam in resolving the conflict with her neighbours of that time. In 1896 the Russian Imperial Government invited a Royal Siamese representative to participate in the festivities on the occasion of the coronation of Nicholas II as the Tsar of Russia.

A year later King Chulalongkorn himself paid a visit to Russia. Friendly and sincere support provided to him by the Russian side played a very important role in the success of that trip. The highest honours, utmost hospitality and respect which was extended to King Chulalongkorn in Russia once and for all confirmed the status of the Siamese monarch as a sovereign equal to European kings.

When King Chulalongkorn arrived in St Petersburg on 19 June 1897 by the special imperial train, he was welcomed at the New Peterhof station by the members of the imperial family and a military escort of the Imperial Guards. From the station the King of Siam proceeded to the Peterhof Palace, the imperial summer residence, where Tsar Nicholas II welcomed him. During the following ten days the King of Siam visited St Petersburg, Moscow and the main Russian naval base in Kronshadt.

³ St Andrew is considered one of the protectors of Russia. The Order in his honour is the first and the most revered decoration in Russian history. It was established by the Tsar Peter the Great in 1698. According to its Statute recipients of the Order were supposed to have the rank not lower than full generals in the military and the highest officials in the civil service. The Order was restored in 1998 and now is the highest decoration in the Russian Federation. The motto of the Order is “For faith and fidelity”.

King Chulalongkorn's visit prompted sincere and widespread interest in Siam and Siamese affairs among the Russian public. Newspapers extensively covered the visit, issuing publications about Siam and the Siamese king. For example, *Vedomosti (News) of St Petersburg*, a leading Russian newspaper wrote in an editorial: "In his person we are greeting not only one of the greatest men of our time, [...] but also a true friend of Russia. The power of this friendship lies in mutual respect, in the feelings of straightforwardness and simplicity common to both peoples (...). Our friendship towards Siam is honest and not hypocritical, which His Majesty the King of Siam can confidently rely upon".⁴

During the negotiations in St Petersburg Nicholas II and King Chulalongkorn agreed to establish diplomatic relations between Russia and Siam and to prepare the Treaty of Friendship and Maritime Navigation, which was signed in 1899. The monarchs agreed also that Prince Chakrabongse, the second son of King Chulalongkorn, would come to Russia for his studies and military training.⁵

Following the decision of the two sovereigns, the exchange of diplomatic representatives took place in 1897 and 1898. Phraya Suriya Nuvat, the Siamese Minister who was representing King Chulalongkorn in Europe with residence in Paris, received an additional appointment to the Russian Imperial Court. He had accompanied the king on his Russian trip and had been introduced to Nicholas II.

In 1898 Alexander Olarovski, the Russian Consul-General in New York, was transferred to Siam and appointed as the Russian Chargé d'Affaires and Consul-General. Before his departure for Bangkok, Olarovski received a ten-page letter of instructions from the Russian Foreign Ministry. The major part contained clear directions concerning Russian policy towards Siam. The essence of that policy was expressed in the following lines of the letter: "Your conduct in its entirety should bear the imprint of the favourable attention which our august monarch is willing to extend to the person of the Siamese King, as well as to the fortunes of his people; it should respond to the sincerity and warmth which are placed by Siam at the base of our relations. Simultaneously, you should avoid any mercantile motive whatsoever, or desire to pursue any kind of benefit. Finally, your conduct should respond to the expectations of that country to receive on the part of Russia the

⁴ Cited in Melnichenko V.N. 'Russia and Siam'. In *Russia and the Far East*, St Petersburg, 2002. p. 656.

⁵ Prince Chakrabongse graduated from the Corps des Pages and with honours from the Academy of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces. The prince then had a significant career in the Hussar regiment of the Imperial Guards and was promoted to the rank of colonel. After his return to Siam Prince Chakrabongse was awarded the Russian military rank of General of Cavalry.

Prince Chakrabongse's studies in Russia paved the way for other children from the Siamese noble families to study in Russian universities and in the first decade of the twentieth century several of them were obtaining their education in Russia.

desired concern for her interests and find in this concern the necessary moral support in the unequal struggle with her mighty neighbours”.⁶

The text of the letter had been personally approved by the Russian Tsar, and the diplomatic representatives of Russia in Bangkok consistently followed it.

Alexander Olarovski was not a random choice for the first Russian envoy in Siam. In 1896–1897, while he was still in New York, Olarovski had prepared a number of analytical reports on the situation in and around Siam for the Russian Foreign Ministry. His conclusions regarding the significance of Siam as one of the only two nations of Asia which were independent at that time (the other being Japan), and were also undergoing advanced modernization, helped to shape the Russian Government’s policies towards this country.

Olarovski stressed in his reports that in the political and economic circumstances existing then in the Far East, the Russian-Siamese friendship could become highly beneficial for both countries.

A very well educated, experienced diplomat and thoughtful analyst, Olarovski was also a cheerful and charming host when he entertained Thai and foreign dignitaries at his residence. His status among foreign diplomats and other foreigners living in Bangkok was slightly different, as it always bore the mark of the special relationship existing between the monarchs of the two countries.

It might not be widely known these days, but Olarovski was a principal founder and the first chairman of the Royal Bangkok Sports Club, and the charter given to the club by King Chulalongkorn was issued in Olarovski’s name. One of the best horseback riders present in Siam at that time, and an experienced horse breeder, Alexander Olarovski even wrote a brochure on the subject for the use in the Club’s own programme of racehorse breeding.

The establishment of diplomatic relations and the signing of several treaties that followed, as well as the development of regular dynastic and personal contacts, helped to promote deeper mutual knowledge between the two peoples.

In the beginning of the twentieth century interest about Siam in Russia reached its peak. One of the major cultural events which boosted this interest was the performance of a company of the Royal Siamese Ballet in St Petersburg in 1900. The traditional Siamese theatre had staged the Ramakien before the future Nicholas II during his visit to Siam. In 1900 it staged two performances in St Petersburg, as a part of the first-ever international tour of Siamese dancers. The Siamese ballet greatly impressed the artistic circles of the Russian capital and led to the real discovery of Siam by the Russian public.

⁶ Russia-Siam. 1863–1917. Documents. Moscow, 1997. p. 85.

A famous ballet columnist of the time, N. Svetlov wrote about the performance: “This year the Siamese ballet appeared for the first time on the stages of the leading European theatres and met with outstanding success everywhere, with its original music, picturesque costumes, exotic dances and rich contents of the scenes performed [...]. The main motives of some of the dances, for example, the Fan Dance, the Lantern Dance and the Dance with Silver Lances, are products of truly genuine choreographic thinking and beautiful form, full of elaborate patterns and complex combinations and, adjusted in a certain way to the requirements of our art, could easily enter our European choreography as new elements”.⁷

The impression made by the Siamese dancers on the Russian public was so great that it gave an impulse to intensive research in the culture and history of Siam. During the period 1895–1913 more than 30 books and brochures on Siam were published and immediately sold out in Russia. Impressed by the Siamese ballet, famous Russian stage decorator and artist, L. Bakst, painted a picture, “The Siamese Sacred Dance”, and used Siamese motives in many of his stage decorations for ballets where oriental themes were dominant. The world-famous Karl Fabergé, the founder of the House of Fabergé and imperial jeweller, while in Bangkok for the coronation of King Vajiravudh, created a rich collection of jewellery with Siamese motives and a number of Buddha images.

Almost at the same time, the first collections of the Siamese art appeared in the Russian museums. In 1906 an official from the Imperial Ethnographic Museum was dispatched by the Russian Academy of Sciences to Bangkok and Ayutthaya with the task of collecting samples of Siamese sculpture. He brought back the collection of 144 items of Buddhist sculpture, traditional Siamese weapons, musical instruments, ceramics, clothes, coins and even banknotes which is now on display at the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, widely known in Russia as *Kunstkamera*, in St Petersburg.⁸

In this museum there is also a set of masks which were used by the Siamese Royal Ballet dancers who performed in St Petersburg in 1900, traditional Siamese fishing tools, and models of fishing boats and shipyards exhibited during the International Fishery Industry Exhibition held in St Petersburg in 1902.

A very special place in the Siamese collection at the museum is occupied by royal gifts presented by King Chulalongkorn to the future Tsar Nicholas II during his visit to Siam in 1891. Among them are a sabre, a Siamese sword and a

⁷ Melnichenko V.N., ‘Russia and Siam’, In *Russia and the Far East*. St Petersburg, 2002. pp. 658–659.

⁸ *Kunstkamera* is the oldest Russian government museum. It was founded by a decree of Tsar Peter the Great in 1704 and was the first step in the creation of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Even today the Academy’s logo is a silhouette of the *Kunstkamera* building.

dagger, all decorated with jewels and precious metals. Those items are kept in special crates bearing the royal symbols of Siam.

The Siamese collection at the Kunstkamera Museum reflects different angles of traditional Siamese culture and everyday life of the Thais. It gives a perception of the skills of Siamese craftsmen who created these artefacts, as well as of the tastes of the people for whom these items were crafted. In other words, this collection creates a vision of everyday life of the Siamese who lived in the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries.

Besides the Kunstkamera, a collection of Siamese art and sculpture is on display at another world-famous Russian museum—the State Hermitage in St Petersburg.

The Hermitage collection of Siamese art consists now of more than 300 items. The initial and major part of it was gathered by the Russian Minister in Siam in 1911–1914, G. Planson. Most of these items are religious wooden, bronze and clay sculptures, as well as other religious objects and works of applied art dating from the fourteenth to nineteenth centuries.

Among them, one of the noteworthy works of art is the sixteenth century Pachekabuddha from Lan Na. This statue represents an individual who attained enlightenment through his personal efforts, and who had heard neither about the Lord Buddha nor about his teaching. This figure is regarded as an important item in the Hermitage collection, for this personage, according to specialists, is rarely represented in the Siamese art. The only other statue of Pachekabuddha outside Thailand is in one of the museums in Paris.

The Buddha Maravidjaya, again from Lan Na, seventeenth century, is another jewel of the Hermitage collection. It is notable, in particular, for an inscription on the pedestal of the statue which describes the statue as the means of transferring merit from the owners of the statue to their parents in order to improve their karma. According to Russian experts, such statues of the Buddha with inscriptions of merit-making for parents were not widely represented in Siam in ancient times. That is why it is considered that this statue is evidence of a specific and rare Siamese Buddhist ritual in the past.

A small but remarkable part of the collection constitutes the gifts presented by King Chulalongkorn to the future Tsar Nicholas II in 1891. It consists of three items: a pair of elephant tusks, a pair of candlesticks and an epergne. The three-branched candlesticks were crafted especially for the occasion of the visit of the Russian heir and presented to the Tsarevich by the King of Siam during a dinner reception at the Bang Pa In Palace on 22 March 1891, together with the table decoration. The epergne is in fact a betel cup of very elaborate craftsmanship. Cups of this shape and ornament were used, according to Russian art experts, only by the heirs to the Siamese throne. In 1894 all these items became part of the exhibition of gifts presented to Tsarevich Nicholas during his Eastern voyage.



King Chulalongkorn and Tsar Nicholas II



The Peterhof Palace, St Petersburg, where King Chulalongkorn stayed during his state visit





H.M. King Bhumibol and President Putin at a banquet during the State visit of the Russian President to Thailand, October 2003



Siamese table decoration presented to the Tsarevich by the King



Pair of Siamese candlesticks presented to Tsarevich by the King

At present the museum collections are being enriched by the gifts from Russian academics, Thai students completing their education in Russia, and objects collected by museum officials on their trips to Thailand.

The development of the Russian-Thai cultural relations in the twentieth century followed the pattern and shared the fate of diplomatic and political relations between the two countries. During the decades from the 1917 revolution in Russia up to 1941, when the USSR and Thailand re-established diplomatic relations, there were practically no contacts between the two states and peoples. The process of restoring relations was interrupted by the Second World War and diplomatic missions at the legation level were exchanged only in 1947. Thailand thus became the first non-communist South-East Asian country to establish diplomatic ties with the USSR.

Since then the interaction between the USSR and Thailand has developed steadily, with mutual respect being dominant in bilateral relations. Important landmark events in this sense were the visits to Moscow and St Petersburg by the members of the royal family, and the exchange of visits by the heads of the respective governments. In the cultural sphere, Bangkok witnessed numerous performances of Russian ballet dancers, art exhibitions, symphony concerts, including those to mark the 50 years' Golden Jubilee of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej's accession to the throne.

A major stride along the road of advancing bilateral multifaceted cooperation was made by the official visit of H.E. Dr Thaksin Shinawatra, Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Thailand, to Russia in October 2002, and the State visit of H.E. Mr Vladimir Putin, the President of the Russian Federation, to Thailand in October 2003. Due to the efforts of both sides Russian-Thai relations have reached the level of strategic partnership.

The State visit of President Vladimir Putin has a very important meaning for both our countries. The meeting with His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej, together with contacts and negotiations that took place in Bangkok helped to complete the rebirth of that special nature and character of the Russia-Thailand bilateral interaction which had been first established between our nations over a hundred years ago. As the Russian President declared in Bangkok "Time has in no way eroded our peoples' mutual attraction", which constitutes a good ground for the development of our present relations.

An outcome of these two top-level visits was an intensification of mutually advantageous trade, and economic, scientific and technical cooperation took place. Substantial positive shifts are visible also in the Russian-Thai personal contacts.

Particularly the year 2003 was very fruitful in this respect. A Thai delegation took part in the celebration of the 300 years' anniversary of St Petersburg. Later, in August, the 'Days of Thailand' were held in the "Northern Capital" as St Petersburg is known in Russia. Dancers from the Moscow Classical Ballet Theatre and musicians of the St Petersburg State Symphony Orchestra took part in the Fifth Bangkok International Music and Dance Festival, and a film "The Russian Ark" by the Russian director A. Sokurov was shown at the Bangkok International Film Festival.

One of the brightest events in the history of the Russian-Thai cultural relations was the world premiere of the ballet "Katya and the Prince of Siam", which took place in Bangkok in December last year. The ballet is based on one of the most romantic stories of the end of the nineteenth century—the true story of love of Prince Chakrabongse and Russian noblewoman Ekaterina Desnitskaya whom the prince married and brought to Siam where she became known as "Mom Katerin". Of course this ballet is not a biography told through the language of dance. It is a piece of art inspired by the story of the prince and his Russian wife. It takes the public into the private world of two people from completely different civilizations who were drawn to each other despite their differences and many difficulties in their path. The performance was brilliantly staged by the Kremlin Ballet Theatre (with choreography by Andrey Petrov) and accompanied by the music composed by Pavel Ovsyannikov, conductor of the Presidential Orchestra of the Russian Federation. As President Vladimir Putin noted in his message sent on this occasion, "it is symbolic that now, when relations between our countries are undergoing a revival, cultural personalities have looked back to the early times of the Russian-Thai friendship". The ballet was very warmly welcomed by the Thai audience and substantially enriched our cultural interaction.

Another good example of the mutual cultural cooperation was the joint concert of the Presidential Orchestra of the Russian Federation, leading vocalists from the Mariinsky Theatre of St Petersburg and a chorus made up of some one hundred students of Chulalongkorn University which performed in commemoration of 150th anniversary of the birthday of King Chulalongkorn.

During the State visit of the Russian President in October 2003 the Ministries of Culture of Russia and Thailand signed a Protocol on Cooperation for the years 2004–2006. In accordance with this document, 'Days of Russian Culture' are to be held in the Kingdom of Thailand in December in 2004, and 'Days of Thai Culture' in the Russian Federation, in the spring of 2005. Both sides also plan to organize concert tours, exhibitions and fairs. Exchanges in the spheres of music, theatre, the preservation and restoration of historical monuments are continuing and becoming more active and regular. Specialists in various fields from both sides will participate in scientific conferences and symposia.

Personal contacts do not, naturally, consist only of direct cultural exchanges. Among other spheres of individual interaction there are also education and tourism. Cooperation in these fields contributes greatly to the development of people-to-people contacts and deepens mutual understanding between peoples.

More and more young Thais want to learn the Russian language. Many Thai students choose Russian universities for higher education, mainly in information technologies, ecology, law, and medicine. Now graduates of Russian universities find jobs not only in the private sector, but also in government agencies.

The latest example of the intensification of our interaction in the sphere of tourism is the appointment of Mrs Panga Vathanakul, managing director of a major hotel in Pattaya, a prominent Thai businesswoman and public figure occupying a number of high-level positions, as the first Russian Honorary Consul in Pattaya. This appointment will further promote personal and tourist contacts between our countries, given that more than 50,000 Russians visit Thailand annually.

While staying in Bangkok President Vladimir Putin stressed that both Thailand and Russia are ancient and dynamically developing States. We are efficiently building our relations of a new type based on mutual respect of national interest, confidence, sincerity and mutual belief in good intentions of each other. These principles are the essence and the cornerstone of the close and friendly relationship between the Russian Federation and the Kingdom of Thailand.

Our personal cooperation, being an integral part of the whole complex of bilateral interaction, definitely has a great potential for further development. To realize it in practice, mutual efforts are necessary, to deepen knowledge of each other's historical, cultural and spiritual heritage, for the advancement and promotion of people-to-people contacts at various levels and in various spheres.

Nowadays Russia and Thailand enjoy excellent and mutually beneficial relations which I am confident will be further enhanced and developed in the years to come.

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