

Suankularb English School: A School for Future Bureaucrats and the Ruling Class, 1883-1897¹

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Abstract

From 1883, Siamese officials who believed that knowledge of the English language would played a vital role in the functioning of a modern bureaucracy began to establish government English schools as part of a wider set of reforms to the Siamese state. However, at the same time, the state also tried to maintain the social status quo by restricting access to such schools to descendants of the ruling class. One vital example was the Suankularb English School, where commoners and those of Chinese origin were often prevented from attending, either because they could not afford the prohibitive fee or they failed to commit to a future career in the bureaucracy. Nevertheless, demands of the new bureaucratic system, which required greater numbers of people with experience and expertise, meant such restrictions were increasingly impractical. From the mid-1890s, therefore, Suankularb English School gradually relaxed its restriction on

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entrance. As more royal schools were founded that had the same mission and function, particularly Rajavidyalaya (King's College), the exclusive nature of the school was reduced. Furthermore, educational reforms that saw the inclusion of the English language as a subject in the curriculum at the secondary level, resulted in a more expansive provision of English language education, meaning that it was no longer restricted to a few royal schools.

Bureaucratic reform and the state's provision of English language education

From the early years of King Chulalongkorn's reign (r. 1868-1910), and particularly from 1871, the provision of English language education stemmed from the need to service the state with a greater number bureaucrats, and to increase the King's personal access to manpower. These men did not only need to know the Thai language and other modern Western disciplines, they also needed to be able to use the English language, which it was believed would help integrate a broader knowledge from abroad, and which would in turn help to develop the state. However, conflict between King Chulalongkorn and the Regent (Somdej Chaophraya Borommaha Srisuriyawongse, hereinafter referred to as "Somdej Chaophraya"), and the Uparaja (Prince Wichaichan) meant that in the first ten years, the provision of English language education experienced continual disruptions. The first two royal English schools at that time were Francis Patterson's School (1872-1875) and Samuel G. McFarland's School (1879-1892). The first was set up by an English teacher who had been visiting his relatives in Siam and was hired by the King to teach his younger brothers and the Royal Pages Bodyguards. The school closed when the three-year contract of the teacher ended.⁴ The second, known first as Suan Anand School and later as Sunantalai School, was administered by a former American

⁴ Prince Damrong, *Memoirs*, 167, 172-173.

missionary who had been in Siam for sixteen years. Although this school was better organized and lasted for fourteen years, the King soon became displeased and paid less attention to the school due to the egalitarian and universal ethos of the school that sought education for all and emphasized a ‘Republican’ spirit. As a result, the school survived largely by recruiting students from the prosperous Chinese mercantile community.⁵

A more continuous and stable provision would be seen from 1883, when King Chulalongkorn became interested in hiring a new wave of bureaucrats to handle the bureaucratic reform. From this time, the provision of modern education was expanded vigorously in several fields, covering Thai language, modern Western knowledge, such as arithmetic, geography, and English. The school at Suankularb Villa, which already taught English, had initially been founded to educate men for the Royal Pages Bodyguard Regiment, and in particular, had sought to recruit members of the royal family of lower ranks, such as *Mom Chao* and *Mom Ratchawong*. However, in 1883, King Chulalongkorn decided to change the purpose of the school to allow for the training of general bureaucrats,⁶ stating that he believed that other governmental agencies were also in need of competent, well-educated individuals. It was therefore decided that those who studied to join the Royal Pages Bodyguard would study only basic courses at the school before furthering their studies in specific military classes elsewhere.⁷ He then divided the school into two, one offering tuition in Thai and the other in English.

At the same time, there was also a need for clerks to run the bureaucracy, meaning that it became necessary to re-energize attempts to educate commoners so as to ensure they were literate. Earlier, in a royal decree from 1875, King Chulalongkorn had ordered that all royal temples must provide a teacher and must give Thai language and mathematics classes. Initially, this had failed to materialize, partly because the majority of people did not see the benefits of an education

⁵ Wyatt, “Samuel McFarland and Early Educational Modernization”; Warunee, “Brief History of Government School”.

⁶ Damrong, *Short History of Education in Siam*, 5-8.

⁷ Damrong, *Short History of Education in Siam*, 8.

within the current system.⁸ Moreover, because of the slowing process of bureaucratic reform, the state arguably did not regard the policy as urgent.

However, about a year later after Suankularb School was changed to a school for general bureaucrats, in 1884, the first school for the general population, Wat Mahannapharam School, was established at Wat Mahannapharam, the first of many to be opened that year. In the first report of schools, written in 1884 by the Royal Pages Bodyguard Regiment who were in charge of school affairs, it was stated that there were a total of twenty schools, all established in royal temples. Fourteen of these were in the district of Bangkok, four were in Krung Kao, one was in Mueang Nakhon Khueankhan and one was in the district of Mueang Samut Prakan district, with over one thousand students in total.⁹ This marked the beginning of educational provision by the state for its citizens with temples being used as educational institutions.

However, in 1885, in a document entitled, ‘Notification on Schools’, it was noted that there remained suspicion among the general population about the new educational provisions. The document stated that such temple schools were indeed provided for the ‘children of the commoners’, without any fee. However, the document also noted that many people believed that the purpose of the schools was to provide military recruits for the state.¹⁰ Towards the end of the same year, another ‘Notification on Education’ was published, this time stating that having people who are ‘literate is a key source of development for the government, more useful than any other discipline.’ As a result, it was decided that those who were fluent in Thai should be able to make advancement in the bureaucracy, regardless of whether they were from ‘the upper class or from the common background.’ Moreover, if they did not want to pursue a career in the bureaucracy, they should at least finish the second level schooling (*Prayok 2*) in order to free themselves from corvée labor.¹¹ While the rumor about military recruitment

⁸ Kullada, “Education and Modern Bureaucracy”, 6-7.

⁹ “School Report”, *Royal Thai Government Gazette*, 1:317-318.

¹⁰ “Notification on Schools”, *Royal Thai Government Gazette*, 1:166.

¹¹ “Notification on Education”, *Royal Thai Government Gazette*, 1:525.

remained for several years,¹² the fact that the schools offered a genuine opportunity of upward social mobility soon meant that many commoners did start to appreciate the value of gaining an education.

Existing forms of government communication had generally involved oral reports in the royal hall.¹³ Now that more detailed and complex forms of inter-departmental communication were needed, it was essential that the state be manned with highly literate individuals. It was for this reason that the provision for education for both the ruling class and commoners emphasized that the ability to know the Thai language was a priority. At the same time, the Siamese state started to provide English language education because some of the bureaucrats, at both senior and operative levels, were required to know English in order to better understand how a modern government should work. In particular, there was a need to understand Western concepts, such as budgets and public spending, as well as more fundamental ideas, such as *government* or *nation*.¹⁴ As a result, ministries or departments demanded senior management that had knowledge of foreign public organization and a good command of the English language.

One such example of this can be found with plans to reform the Ministry of Interior. On April 4, 1891, King Chulalongkorn wrote to his brother, Prince Damrong, in reference to current plans to overhaul the management of the Ministry. Having reviewed the plan, however, the King found that, in his words, the plan would leave the Ministry ‘unmodernized’, and that if the plan was to be executed, it might not improve the situation significantly. Moreover, he explained that, since the minister did not have sufficient knowledge, the result felt ‘experimental’ and ‘trial-and-error’. The concern was that it might require a more detailed study of ‘Western textbooks in order to get it right.’ As it currently stood, the plan was not in accordance with a royal intention that the, ‘organization must follow the Western pattern, whose system has been developed over a long time’. As a result, it was stipulated that ‘a person with understanding of Western knowledge is required to make a draft plan.’ With this in mind, King Chulalongkorn

¹² “King’s Speech to Students”, *Royal Thai Government Gazette*, 6:47.

¹³ Kullada, “Education and Modern Bureaucracy”, 2-3.

¹⁴ Kullada, “Education and Modern Bureaucracy”, 3.

appointed Prince Damrong, who had a good command of English and experience in organizing the Department of Education, to assist in drafting the plan to modernize the Ministry of Interior. Moreover, he demanded that the draft plan must, 'combine Western organization with the Thai way.'¹⁵

In his subsequent communication to Prince Damrong on April 23, 1891, King Chulalongkorn praised the Prince for his efforts, saying that the revised draft would lay a well-planned foundation and that progress should now be forthcoming. However, his preoccupation remained that Interior Ministry officials might not fully understand when problems presented themselves, fearing that they might not be solved correctly. He therefore stipulated that initially, whenever problems arose, the Interior Minister must consult with Prince Damrong in order to ensure he maintained total control over the process. The concerns proved to be well founded. The following year, Prince Damrong left Siam for Europe for one year.¹⁶ When the reorganization took place it was beset by problems, resulting in anxiety amongst senior officials. In one case a senior official submitted a royal petition on March 28, 1891 accusing the Interior Minister of negligence.¹⁷ Only when Prince Damrong was to return on April 1, 1892, and was himself made the Interior Minister, was the project put back on track.

At the *Krom Tha* (the Government Department that dealt with Foreign Affairs), English was an essential factor in the selection of the Minister of Foreign Affairs. It was not enough to simply have command of the language; total fluency was what was needed. In the past, those selected for the position were familiar with foreign affairs and yearned to know Western customs – people such as Chaophraya Thiphakorawongse (Kham) (1855-1869) and Chaophraya Phanuwongse (Tuam) (1869-1885). Indeed, it was stated that the latter had studied English with Mrs. Bradley, an American missionary wife, while serving as assistant Head of Mueang Petchaburi in 1861. While in that position, he had helped to facilitate the settlement of American missionary families in exchange

¹⁵ NA, R5 M. 99/8.

¹⁶ NA, R5 M. 99/8.

¹⁷ NA, R5 M. 99/8.

for English lessons for him and his family members.¹⁸ Yet, despite this, the record showed that he made several language errors in his official capacity.¹⁹

On October 2, 1882, His Majesty penned a letter admonishing Chaophraya Phanuwongse regarding the improper use of language in a letter to the Dutch consul, containing ‘rude words’, which angered the Dutch Consul. The letter reminded him to be very careful.²⁰ Moreover, there is evidence that his weak command of language might have contributed to his decision to leave the position. As his resignation letter stated on May 1, 1885, ‘neither my intellect nor my knowledge is sufficient to manage foreign affairs.’²¹ While, the main reason for the resignation did not stem directly from the language problem, it was clearly recognized as a significant issue in managing the role successfully.²²

His successor was one of the king’s brothers, Prince Devawongse, an individual who had showed an excellent command of English.²³ Prince Devawongse had been in charge of areas that needed expertise in language and foreign affairs from the beginning of his career. In 1875, he served as Head of the Audit Office, a new department that required a profound knowledge of Thai, English and mathematics. He also often served King Chulalongkorn as Private Secretary for any affairs that needed language expertise. One of his responsibilities, for example, was the examination of Western textbooks in order to find patterns suitable for each and every idea.²⁴ In 1879, he served as Private Secretary, and a year later, when Private Secretary Affairs were divided into Private Secretary for Foreign Affairs and Private Secretary for Internal Affairs,

¹⁸ McFarland, *Historical Sketch of Protestant Missions in Siam*, 92-93.

¹⁹ Wimolphun, *His Royal Highness Prince Krom Phraya Devawongse*, 57-58.

²⁰ Natthawut, *Chaophraya Phanuwongse Vol. 3*, 652-653.

²¹ Supatra, “Authority and role of the Kosathibodi”, 180.

²² Kanthika, ‘From ‘National Exhibition to ‘The Siamese Kingdom Exhibition’ ’, 179-181; Natthawut, *Chaophraya Phanuwongse Vol. 1*, 33-34; Natthawut, *Chaophraya Phanuwongse Vol. 3*, 832-833.

²³ Damrong, *Memoirs*, 173.

²⁴ Damrong, *Bibliographies of the Good People*, 12-13; The Office of His Majesty's Principal Private Secretary, *History of the Office*, 8.

he was appointed to the former position.²⁵ His job included ‘giving consultations regarding foreign affairs’, and thus he oversaw the affairs for the *Krom Tha*.²⁶ In 1881, he organized permanent Thai delegations to foreign countries. These delegations were made under the Private Secretary Department. In 1883, he played a role in signing an agreement with England to establish an International Court in Chiang Mai.²⁷ His competence and expertise in language and foreign affairs, accumulated through his studies and work experience, made Prince Devawongse the best option there was at that time when the Minister of Foreign affairs position became vacant. Prince Devawongse served as Minister of Foreign affairs for over 38 years until his death in 1923.

Apart from administrators, operative officials with a similar command of English, such as clerks who could draft or translate letters, were necessary, particularly in relation to such issues as Foreign Affairs, Customs, Post and Telegraph.²⁸ Likewise, professions, such as soldiers, doctors, teachers and lawyers, also needed English for a similar reason, which explains why several practice schools for specific professions were founded from 1883 in order to give classes in English. As a result, English language education was required to support the bureaucratic reforms that took place from 1883 and was offered to both senior administrators and operative officials.

It is important to recognize that this move, toward providing access to English language education and other modern disciplines, coincided with the death of Somdej Chaophraya, who passed away on 19 January 1882. Throughout the first two decades of King Chulalongkorn’s reign, Somdej Chaophraya had sat at the head of the forces opposed to such reforms that might affect his power.²⁹ While there is no specific indication that he was opposed to reform of the education system, his death, which it has been argued brought about a

²⁵ The Office of His Majesty's Principal Private Secretary, *History of the Office*, 9-11.

²⁶ Damrong, *Bibliographies of the Good People*, 16; Chulalongkorn, *Royalty and Bureaucrats’ Petition*, 19; Supatra, “Authority and role of the Kosathibodi”, 174.

²⁷ Damrong, *Bibliographies of the Good People*, 16-17.

²⁸ Kullada, “Education and Modern Bureaucracy”, 3.

²⁹ Kullada, *The Rise and Decline of Thai Absolutism*, 54-65.

‘change in the regime’, clearly ushered in a profound change in the reform agenda.

A letter entitled ‘Opinions Regarding the Changes in Bureaucracy in 1884’, which collated the thought of noblemen, officials and ambassadors based at the Thai Embassies in London and Paris, provides one of the first examples of reform as a dominant idea among senior bureaucrats. Dated January 8, 1884, almost two years after the death of Somdej Chaophraya,³⁰ the handwritten letter, penned by Prince Prisdang, was a reply to His Majesty’s wishes to hear opinion on political affairs after receiving a report on Burma’s loss of sovereignty.³¹ The content of the letter said that the King should not centralize too much power, suggesting that he should change the system of government from ‘absolute monarchy’ to ‘constitutional monarchy’. The King should remain ‘the highest institution of the country, with absolute power over the ministers.’ He should also, however, appoint a ‘cabinet’ in charge of each ministry with power to ‘act in his name.’³² In his response to those petitioning for a ‘change of the regime’, dated April 29, 1885, King Chulalongkorn explained that it was novel to regard him as having ‘absolute’ power. Since the beginning of his reign, he explained, powers to govern and enact laws were controlled by Somdej Chaophraya and his allies since they had power as kingmakers. By implying that the King’s wishes were the most essential, the word ‘absolute’, could not, therefore, be used to describe the early years of the reign when the monarch had struggled to achieve change. Only following the death of Somdej Chaophraya, did the King feel that he had an ‘opportunity’ to reform the bureaucracy.³³

What the previous examples illustrate is firstly, King Chulalongkorn had not exercised absolute power, either since his ascent to the throne in 1868 or since his second coronation in 1873 (when he reached the age of 20). Rather, Chulalongkorn’s control of state governance was a gradual process that began as a result of him trying to wrest power from the group attached to Somdej Chaophraya. Secondly, this shows how

³⁰ Boonpisit, *Relationship between King Chulalongkorn and Prince Prisdang*, 57.

³¹ Prisdang, *Prince Colonel Prisdang’s Brief Autobiography*, 59-60.

³² Chulalongkorn, *Royalty and Bureaucrats’ Petition*, 22.

³³ Chulalongkorn, *Royalty and Bureaucrats’ Petition*, 53-56.

bureaucratic reform could not happen immediately because he still lacked absolute power. The death of Somdej Chaophraya in 1882, who was the most powerful and influential person in the Kingdom, had therefore made it possible to reform the bureaucracy. Indeed, it was his death that led to the above-mentioned letter on Bureaucratic Reform, submitted in 1884, and which ultimately result in the ‘Great’ Bureaucratic Reform of 1887, a move that saw an increase in government departments from six to twelve.³⁴ The decision to provide a modern education in order to support the bureaucratic system, including English language education, must be understood in relation to this shift in the make up of the government. The transformation of the Suankularb English School into an institution that might support such government policies was a vital part of this strategy.

The Suankularb English School

In the new era, the provision of English language education began in 1883 when it was announced that Suankularb School would be changed from a school specifically for the Royal Pages Bodyguard Regiment, to a school for general bureaucrats with both Thai and English programs.³⁵ The English program, or the English School, was only a part of the Suankularb School, and was for ten years to be the only school that provided tuition in English for members of the ruling elite who sought roles in the expanded bureaucracy. Initially, this education was offered only to the royal family, and then to upper class members of Thai society. Yet, by the 1890s, the school had been forced to expand membership, making the school open to all students who could afford the enrollment tuition.

Suankularb School provided English education since it had been the Royal Pages Bodyguard Regiment’s school from 1881, with Baboo Ramsamay Pultar, a Brahman from Kolkata, as the English teacher.³⁶

³⁴ Chulalongkorn, *Royalty and Bureaucrats’ Petition*, 61-108.

³⁵ Damrong, *Short History of Education in Siam*, 9; Maha-ammataya, *Origin of Thai Survey Department*, 16-17.

³⁶ Maha-ammataya, *Origin of Thai Survey Department*, 16-17; Wyatt, *The Politics of Reform in Thailand*, 109.

When Suankularb School was turned into a school for general bureaucrats in 1883, Prince Damrong approached John A. Eakin, an American citizen and former vice principal of Sunantalai School, to work as principal of the English program in order to improve the quality of the teaching. However, Mr. Akin refused because he disagreed with the school's principle of not accepting common students.³⁷ In 1885, the school employed H. Wonsley Rolfe to replace Baboo Ramsamay Pultar.³⁸ While later, there were a number of Thai teachers employed, the school always sought to hire European teachers, mostly Englishmen, both as the principal of the school and as the teaching staff.³⁹ This helped to distinguish the school from other institutions in the city. Sunantalai School closed down in 1892, and the two other state-managed English schools did not have any Western teachers in their faculties. Ban Phraya Nana School relocated, and was renamed from Sunantalai School and hired Thai teachers who had studied in the United States. Ban Chin Yaem School, or New School, was founded in the 1880s by Baboo Ramsamay Pultar, who was also the headmaster. Neither of these schools was able to secure the same degree of status, and as a result, generally provided an English education to the Chinese mercantile class.

From when Suankularb School was first established as a school for the Royal Pages Bodyguard Regiment in 1881, it was intended to be for members of the royal family. The commanding officer of the regiment was Prince Damrong, who wished to 'restore the honor of the royal pages to its previous status', after a period when admission into the guard had relaxed to include wealthy commoners. As a result, the majority of the first ten students were either of *Mom Chao* or *Mom Ratchawong* status.⁴⁰ When Suankularb School was made a school for the training of general bureaucrats in 1883, the state hoped that despite the change, it would continue to be a school for members of the royal family. As stated in a speech by King Chulalongkorn, during his visit to the school on March 27, 1884, this school was founded for members of

³⁷ *The Eakin Family in Thailand*, 19.

³⁸ Wyatt, *The Politics of Reform in Thailand*, 109.

³⁹ *History of Suankularb School*, 111, 145.

⁴⁰ Damrong, *History of Suankularb School*, 26-27.

the royal family with titles of *Mom Chao* and *Mom Ratchawong*, and who currently had no way to work in the bureaucratic system because ‘they were members of the royal family, not bureaucrats.’ By attending the school, therefore, the King hoped that they would have enough knowledge to take an exam that would allow them to enter the bureaucracy on the basis of merit. This, the King made clear, was better than the old customs of ‘offering flowers, incense and candles’ because ‘[the King] would be able to see progress in their studies, and he hopes that his sons and other princes would attend this school like any other descendants from the upper class.’ For the descendants of the ‘bureaucrat families’ and commoners, the state would provide an education for them in the existing and newly established schools.⁴¹ The desire to distinguish the school for the members of the royal family from others also appeared in the ‘Notification on Schools’, dated May 1, 1885, and stated that ‘... a school for the members of the royal family has been founded at Suankularb School and [the King] will establish a separate school for bureaucrats.’⁴²

However, while there is evidence that some of the King’s sons did indeed study at Suankularb School, the intention to preserve the school as an institution solely for members of the royal family did not last long. As stipulated in the inspection report at Suankularb School in 1886, a total of thirteen students were awarded at the exam ceremony, four of which were not members of the royal family.⁴³ One reason for this was that from 1886 onwards, the school was categorized as a higher education school for those who graduated from the first level (*Prayok 1*) from various temples and who wished to continue their studies to level two (*Prayok 2*) in order to prepare for the final exam.⁴⁴ Another reason

⁴¹ “The exam at Phra Tumnuak Derm Suankularb School”, *Royal Thai Government Gazette*, 1:131.

⁴² “Notification on Education”, *Royal Thai Government Gazette*, 1:166.

⁴³ “The Report on Thai Schools”, *Royal Thai Government Gazette*, 4:151; “The Report on Thai Schools (continued)”, *Royal Thai Government Gazette*, 4:168; Phra Tumnuak Suankularb School (continued)”, *Royal Thai Government Gazette*, 4:196; Phra Tumnuak Suankularb School (continued)”, *Royal Thai Government Gazette*, 4:205.

⁴⁴ “Report by Department of Public Education”, *Royal Thai Government Gazette*, 4:83-84.

was due to the increased popularity of education itself among the nobility and wealthy commoners, and the fact that there was no other higher education school available. For this reason, Suankularb School was in need of expansion to provide an education for more students.

However, as membership of the school expanded, the school increasingly sought to set up some measures to screen students. For example, in the past the school used to provide for the students in every aspect, from clothing to textbooks and other stationery.⁴⁵ However, a report from the Ministry of Education in 1889 reported that the school had reduced their support for students, obliging them to take care of these expenses themselves. The cut started with the curtailing of textbooks and stationary distributed to students. Furthermore, the school started to collect an annual fee of 20 baht for lunch, stating that they did not want to spend more ‘royal wealth’ subsidizing such things. Firstly, the school collected from the teachers because it was agreed that their salary was sufficient. For the students, it was decided that they were all ‘descendants of nobility and bureaucrats; their parents and relatives are willing to give education to their descendent and they have enough money’ to help pay for lunch.⁴⁶ Apart from the fact that the fee would help to ‘save royal wealth’, a report from the Suankularb School to parents also stated that the lunch fee would encourage the students to study harder because ‘the education was not free-of-charge’ and that this ‘would keep bad people from becoming students.’⁴⁷

The initial decision to charge for the school meals came as a response to the need to provide food for students, which in turn had required the hiring of cooking staff. In 1890, however, the school let merchants set up food stalls for students. By doing this, the school had a stream of income from the merchants,⁴⁸ and the lunch fee was then cancelled. Despite that, the school decided to continue collecting an annuity of 12 baht from the students as a ‘guarantee deposit’. If the students had good behavior and studied hard, with less than three days of absences, 1 baht per month would be returned, with a total of 12 baht

⁴⁵ Damrong, *History of Suankularb School*, 33; NA, R5 S.1/24.

⁴⁶ NA, R5 S.1/24.

⁴⁷ NA, R5 S.1/30.

⁴⁸ NA, R5 S.1/24.

to be paid by the end of the year. For those who broke the rules, or who had more than three days of absences, the money would be withheld. Money that was withheld would then be used for school maintenance.⁴⁹ In the report of the Suankularb School, there were two stated reasons for money collection. Firstly, it was felt that it would encourage the students to study hard. Secondly, 'it would keep bad students (*corvée*) from the good ones (descendants of the upper class).'⁵⁰ The reason for keeping *corvée* from descendants of the upper class appeared only in the school report, not the report from the Ministry of Public Education to the King. However, it is still clear that the cancellation of support for lunch, textbooks and the introduction of a guarantee deposit, although refundable, made economic factors a key means of restricting access.

However, being a higher education school for those who graduated from primary to secondary level from 1886, the school admitted more students from a commoner background, making the school a far more mixed environment. In the report of the Department of Education in 1888, of the twenty-four students taking the secondary level exam, thirteen were originally from Suankularb School while the other eleven had graduated from other schools.⁵¹ Of the twenty students taking the second level exam in 1889, fourteen were originally from Suankularb School while the other sixteen had graduated from other schools. Even at the primary level, those from common background or of Chinese origin, or descendants of bureaucrats of lower categories, increased in number.

In 1891, of the fifteen students studying at primary level (*paryok* 1), and who were awarded for their performance, two were *Mom Chao*, three were descendants of bureaucrats of *Luang* and higher ranks, three were descendants of bureaucrats of *Khun* and lower ranks,⁵² three were of common background, three were of Chinese origin and one was an

⁴⁹ NA, R5 S.1/24; NA, R5 S.1/30.

⁵⁰ NA, R5 S.1/30. "Report by Examination Commissioner", *Royal Thai Government Gazette*, 5:44.

⁵¹ "Report by Examination Commissioner," *Royal Thai Government Gazette*, 5:44.

⁵² The ranks of Thai nobility could be classified from the highest to the lowest ranks as *Chao Phraya*, *Phraya*, *Luang*, *Khun*, *Muen*, and *Phan*.

Englishman.⁵³ In 1896, of the thirty-nine students who passed the pre-primary level, four were members of the royal family (from *Mom Chao* to *Mom Ratchawong*), eight were descendants of bureaucrats of *Luang* or higher categories, four were descendants of bureaucrats of *Khun* or lower categories, nine were of common background, two were of Chinese origin and two were monks.⁵⁴

While the Thai program at Suankularb School saw more students of common background and of Chinese origin from its fifth year, the English program at the same school seemed to be able to maintain its status as a school for the ruling class for longer. This can be seen from the first English exam in 1891 where of the thirteen students who passed the exam, one was a Prince, three were *Mom Chao*, eight were descendants of bureaucrats of *Luang* or higher categories and one was a descendent of bureaucrats of *Khun* or lower categories. However, even here, while the state encouraged and gave privileges to the sons of noblemen, modern education based on merit alone could not in the end prevent sons of a commoner status who were enthusiastic for new channels for upward mobility to advance in their studies. Of the twenty-two students who passed the exam in 1894, sixteen were descendants of bureaucrats of *Luang* or higher categories and six were of common background.⁵⁵ In the 1895 exam, of the forty-four students who passed the exam, eighteen were of common background, fifteen were descendants of bureaucrats of *Luang* or higher categories, seven were descendants of bureaucrats of *Khun* or lower categories, two were of Chinese origin and one was *Mom Chao*.⁵⁶

On the surface, therefore, the English school encountered the same problem as the Thai school, in that it failed to restrict access to the

⁵³ “Examination and Royal Award Ceremony”, *Royal Thai Government Gazette*, 8:176.

⁵⁴ “List of students who passed the examination”, *Royal Thai Government Gazette*, 13:340-342; “List of students who passed the examination”, *Royal Thai Government Gazette*, 13:354-355.

⁵⁵ “Examination and Royal Award Ceremony”, *Royal Thai Government Gazette*, 8:176-177; “Notification of Ministry of Public Education”, *Royal Thai Government Gazette*, 12:220.

⁵⁶ “Notification of Ministry of Public Education”, *Royal Thai Government Gazette*, 12:220.

school to descendants of the ruling class. Yet, despite this, it is also clear that the English school was able to maintain its higher status due to the changing picture of education elsewhere. Throughout this period over one thousand students were receiving an education in schools that were established nationwide and regardless of whether these were public schools taught out of temples, or private schools, the vast majority were taught a curriculum in Thai. The number of English schools for male students from 1887 to 1896, both public and private, was limited to only five schools. In this climate, the Suankularb English School was ranked the highest, benefitting from the prestige of being located inside the royal palace and of having been the pilot school for other schools.⁵⁷ Suankularb also received the highest budget to hire teachers in relation to the number of students that attended.⁵⁸

However, the state also tried to maintain its policy to restrict student enrolment at the school. An example of this can be seen in 1894 when three students from Ban Phraya Nana School applied for the English program and the English teacher accepted only one Thai student, rejecting two of Chinese origin. Reporting to the Minister of Public Education, an officer of the Department of Education stated that the students should be allowed to further their studies because they had already studied English for several years. When the minister, Chaophraya Phatsakorawongse, was notified, he decided that ‘the English program at Suankularb School’ was founded for future bureaucrats. If the descendants of Chinese origin would like to become bureaucrats and change to become ‘Thai’, then they could study there. However, if they would like to study for their own professional benefit, there were two other schools for the ‘public’, namely, Ban Phraya Nana School and Baboo Ramsamay Pultar’s school. As a result, it was made clear that the Department of Public Education should inform the public that the English program at Suankularb School was for ‘students who would like to be bureaucrats, and that they needed to study thoroughly.’ For those who did not want to be bureaucrats, even if they were already

⁵⁷ NA, S.50.16/81.

⁵⁸ NA, R5 S.1/3.

students, they must quit and transfer to schools provided for the general population.⁵⁹

Students at the school also held the view that Suankularb English School was an exclusive institution. Education at Suankularb English School had previously provided students both Thai and English language programs, the latter of which would study in Thai for half of the day, and in English for the second half.⁶⁰ Students in the Thai program who had a chance to study English, however, were limited. In the first quarter of 1885, the school's report stated that there were, on average, 110 students who studied Thai, but only twelve who studied English. The following three school reports stated that the number of students in the Thai program who were studying English as well decreased from seventeen to two.⁶¹ There was no indication as to why the number of students who could attend an English class was less than those who studied only in Thai, or what criteria was used to select who could or could not study English. From 1889, the creation of an English proficiency test helped the Department of Public Education understand that the standard of English was still poor. This, it was decided, was possibly because they spent half a day studying Thai, leaving them with 'less time to further their English.'⁶² For the 1890 academic year, the Department of Public Education decided to restructure its education provision, dividing students into three groups: those who did not pass the primary level, but who could not study English; those who did pass the primary level, but did not pass the secondary level and would remain studying English for half a day; and those who passed the second level of Thai class, which was considered the highest class and could study English for the whole day, preparing themselves for the forthcoming English examination.⁶³

This later became the standard for subsequent education provision, in accordance with the 1890 code of the Department of Public Education, and as was restated in 1892, 'English students must have a

⁵⁹ NA, S.50.16/24.

⁶⁰ NA, R5 S.1/14; Damrong, *History of Suankularb School*, 45.

⁶¹ NA, R5 S.1/14.

⁶² NA, R5 S.1/14.

⁶³ NA, R5 S.1/24.

good command of Thai language before starting an English class.’⁶⁴ This would guarantee that the number studying English would be less than those studying in Thai, further confirming the exclusivity of English language education. This also reinforced the view that English language was part of a higher education, while Thai remained part of a basic education. Giving priority to Thai language before English also impacted school management methods between 1897 and 1906 when Suankularb English School became the highest educational school for students who finished middle education or the secondary school and sought to further their studies.⁶⁵ This educational provision by the state was another way to screen students and helped maintain the school’s status as an educational center for a limited group of people.

However, being an exclusive place of study did not necessarily mean that students at the school always sought to graduate to the English program. When it was first expanded to support the bureaucracy in 1883, for most incidences, mastery of the Thai language was sufficient. However, with the continued expansion, ‘the number of officers was less than the amount of work that needed to be done.’ As a result, students who graduated from the Thai language program were in demand from ‘all departments’ who were in need of clerks and ‘had to compete with each other by offering higher salaries.’⁶⁶ Often, this meant that students who finished with Thai language, but with limited command of English, decided to quit the school in order to enter the bureaucracy faster. As King Chulalongkorn explained in a speech in 1890, ‘some only knew one or two hundred words, but told their parents that they knew English sufficiently. Their parents then decided to take them out of school.’⁶⁷

Following this, the King delivered a second speech to students at Suankularb School, stating that they should take time to consider their futures carefully. While their Thai language ability might be sufficient to be bureaucrats, he claimed that by not knowing English, they would ultimately feel ‘frustrated’ because the number of textbooks in Thai

⁶⁴ NA, R5 S.1/3.

⁶⁵ NA, S.50.16/103.

⁶⁶ “King’s Speech to Students”, *Royal Thai Government Gazette*, 6:47.

⁶⁷ “King’s Speech”, *Royal Thai Government Gazette*, 7:24.

language or those translated into Thai was scarce. There was still a need to study from a vast amount of information that was only available in English textbooks. The students should at least learn English until they learnt how to ‘read and translate.’ This would allow them to access a vast selection of books and would provide them with a means to ‘earn a living or fame’ that would far outstrip those who only functioned in Thai. Learning English, he therefore claimed, should be considered a priority, both for those who sought to learn now and run the future state.⁶⁸ When the King learnt from the Department of Education of a reluctance amongst students to learn English, and that the English education provision was not yet well structured, he was devastated and encouraged the students to further their study.⁶⁹

However, the following year there remained evidence that students were unenthusiastic about studying English. As the public report to the Director General of Education stated in 1891, some of the students who were studying at the secondary level, and who were preparing for the final exam, were reluctant to study English at all. Some stated that they were more concerned with passing the Thai exam. Others said that they did not have parental support or that they would like to finish the secondary level first before studying English. For example, Mom Chao Dhamrong Siri said that his father, Prince Siridhaj Sangkas, had told him not to study English before finishing the second level. Some of the parents upon hearing that the school had arranged an English class for their children even sent a letter to the school. They complained and informed the school that they did not want their sons to study English.

Therefore, although the Department of Education restructured the educational plan in 1891, with all students who finished at primary and secondary level given the chance to study English, many could still not be encouraged to take the English class. Moreover, the new plan was not at all practical because there was a lack of teachers. One of the two English teachers asked to limit the number of the students to fifteen. Still, there were fewer students than the limit placed on the class since

⁶⁸ “King’s Speech”, *Royal Thai Government Gazette*, 7:24-25.

⁶⁹ “King’s Speech”, *Royal Thai Government Gazette*, 7:25.

many students refused to take the class.⁷⁰ The following year, in 1892, when the Department of Education was reorganized into the Ministry of Public Education, there remained only fifteen students with two teachers at Suankularb English School.⁷¹ However, from 1892 onwards, the number of students who studied English at Suankularb School gradually increased. These students included descendants of the ruling class, as well as students of common background and of Chinese origin. At the same time, the Suankularb English School gradually converted from a school for the ruling class into a pre-university school. The state also established two more schools for this specific purpose, namely, Rajakumara School (Sons' King School) for princes in 1892 and Rajavidyalaya for students of the ruling class in 1897.

From Royal School to Pre-university School

Rajakumara School and Rajavidyalaya were two major rivals to the prestige of the Suankularb English School. The first school was founded when a large number of the King's sons reached school age. However, while the school's name means 'King's sons', several nephews of the King, and later some pages, also joined the school. Since its opening, some princes and the lower princes of the category *Mom Chao* were also sent to attend the Rajakumara School.⁷² Another royal school, Rajavidyalaya (King's College), was founded five years later with the same mission and function as the Suankularb school, organizing a curriculum in English for future bureaucrats and collecting a tuition fee in order to exclude commoners from attending the school.⁷³

The Suankularb English School saw a decline due to two factors. Firstly, the establishment of these two new schools took away an important number of students from the upper class. Secondly, the educational reforms that took place after King Chulalongkorn's visit to Europe in 1897 resulted in expanded English language education in

⁷⁰ NA, S.1.1/1.

⁷¹ NA, R5 S.1/3.

⁷² "Opening of Rajakumara School", *Royal Thai Government Gazette*, 9:381; NA, R5 T.2/4.

⁷³ NA, R5 S.5/7 (R-L).

other Thai schools. By mirroring the curriculum in Europe, all modernized secondary education now had English subjects in the curriculum, including the Suankularb Thai School. English education was no longer restricted to a few royal schools. As a result, the Ministry of Public Education decided to change the mission and function of Suankularb English School by relocating it from Suankularb Villa to a place outside the palace and transforming it into a pre-university school that could prepare students for the King's scholarship award exam, that would in turn allow them to study abroad or achieve the highest certification in the country before pursuing a career. While the Suankularb English School still remained prestigious, it no longer did so from its exclusive student body, but rather, because it now claimed to educate to the highest level in the country.

In 1911, the Suankularb English School and Thai School were combined and relocated to become a single school once again. There were many schools that taught English as part of their standard curriculum, but the Suankularb school was able to maintain its position as one of the country's most prestigious. Continuing to build upon its title as the 'oldest school', Suankularb continues to hold onto this prestige today.

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