DISCUSSION NOTES

The Roots of the Southeast Asian Primate City

Warren C. Robinson

The "Primate City" is, according to nearly all analysts, the most distinctive feature of urbanism in Southeast Asia. Bangkok, Jakarta, Saigon, Manila, and other such metropolises all represent very large fractions of their total national urban populations and completely overshadow their urban hierarchies. They are "Primate Cities" as this term was defined by Jefferson (1939).

The received explanation of Southeast Asian "primacy" rests on the impact of Western colonialism. Brian J.L. Berry has put this as follows:

The reason for primacy is to be found in the filtering mechanism that produces hierarchical diffusion. This mechanism works poorly, if at all, in many parts of the world. Instead of development "trickling down" the urban size-ratchet and spreading its effects outward within urban fields, growth is concentrated in a few metropolitan centers and a wide gulf between metropolis and smaller city is apparent. Rather than articulation there is polarization...

Under colonial rule most empires were controlled by holding key cities and strategic points: "head links" that connected the colonial net. For colonial powers to extend and consolidate their authority in alien social geographical territories, cities were the necessary base of action. British rule in India, for example, centered on capital and provincial cities both for maintaining an integrated and authoritarian administrative structure and for securing the economic base of its power—the collection of taxes and control over the export of raw materials and the import to British manufactured goods. Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, the structure of the colonial economy did not permit the cities to be generative of economic growth. The colonial cities were subordinate to the metropolis and world trade, acting as foci for the alien middlemen and effectively inhibiting economic growth (Berry 1961).

This explanation has been adopted, more or less uncritically by many other writers (Jakobson 1971; Weitz 1973; Salah El-Shakhs 1972) and given a neo-Marxist "world systems" flavour by some (particularly McGee 1967). Since Bangkok is the outstanding example of Primacy, it is of interest to re-examine the
"colloquial explanation" as applied to this case.

In fact, there are immediate, obvious objections to this interpretation of the growth and role of the Thai Metropolis. First, traditional Thai civilization has always functioned around a large urban centre. Bangkok, as far back as 1850, already contained some ten per cent of the total population of the Kingdom. Ayuthia, the capital which preceded it, was destroyed by the Burmese in 1769 after it had been the royal city for 300 years. At the time of its destruction, it was said to have a population of one million persons and, if true, it was larger than either London or Paris (Chula 1954). Indeed, the very first Thai dynasties centred around cities—Sukhotai, Swahankhalok, and Kampaeng Phet, at the head of the central plains—and it seems clear that the tradition of a large, dominant capital city far antedates the modern period of colonialism. This preference for a large urban-based population system was political and social but also military and geopolitical. The Thais never produced (or allowed to grow) a genuine decentralized feudalism. No Lords of the "Border Marches" emerged, except perhaps, in the south. The nobles, court officials, and heirs of the monarch were all forced to reside at the royal city and thus be accessible and also harmless to the monarch. This pattern is a familiar one in the late stages of Feudalism (France and Versailles; England and Tudor London) but it seems to have emerged early in Thailand.

Beyond these internal political concerns, there was also the fact that wars among Thailand and its neighbours, Burma, Laos, and Cambodia, were a constant process. The great hope of the attacker was to mobilize secretly and march quickly on the enemy. The only hope of the defender was to have a relatively large population-base close at hand from which an army could quickly be counter-mobilized. A standing army was too expensive, and out of the question since most of the population was still needed in agriculture (Chula 1954). These large population centres were made possible and perhaps even required by the systematic use of irrigation to produce an agricultural surplus. The agricultural system was fully capable of supporting a large urban population, but also required substantial labour inputs. Wittfogel (1957) and others have already noted this interaction of political centralism and irrigation agriculture.

To sum up, many factors lead one to the conclusion that very large urban centres have always characterized Thai civilization and that it had important purely local economic, geopolitical and social roots. It is not a modern phenomenon and is not connected with the colonial period.

Finally, very simply, Thailand has never been colonized. Whatever the needs of the colonial powers in Indonesia, Malaysia, Burma or elsewhere, Bangkok's growth was not directed by the needs of colonial governors, soldiers, or businessmen. The role of foreign trade was small in Thailand, until well into this century. Only in the post World War II period have foreign influences played a significant role in urban growth in Thailand; and these influences have, in fact, led to the growth of new large urban areas outside Bangkok, chiefly in the northeast. Yet, in a different sense, perhaps "foreign" influences were at work in creating Bangkok and the other primate cities and urbanism of Southeast Asia. But, they were Asian influences. Thus, Rozman reminds us: