

# King Chulalongkorn : Biography and His Activities in Medicine and Public Health

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## Abstract

King Rama V, or Chulalongkorn, was the fifth monarch of the Chakri Dynasty. He was one of the most beloved of the Thai kings due to his many activities including abolishing slavery without bloodshed and especially his skillful diplomacy which succeeded in steering Siam out of the grips of the colonial powers. His activities also included reform of the administration of the kingdom according to the European model and in bringing Siam into the modern era with such exquisite skills that he is still vividly remembered today. His reign also saw many developments in medicine and public health. The King's role in these areas, however, were clouded by his more visible activities in politics and diplomacy. The result is that the Thai public learned rather little about his role in these areas. This article aims at collecting this and to show the King's very important role in modernizing medicine and public health in Siam.

**Key word :** History of Medicine, Medicine, Public Health

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## Biography

King Chulalongkorn, a son of King Rama IV (King Mongkut) and Queen Debsirin, was born on September 20, 1853<sup>(1)</sup>. When he was nine years old, he studied the traditional subjects according to the

custom for princes at the time. He also studied English as well as studying under his father's tutelage and participated in the administration of the Kingdom by attending his father's activities. Prince Chulalongkorn

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ascended the throne in 1868, after King Mongkut's death from malaria following his successful trip to Waa Kor in Prachuap Khiri Khan to observe a full solar eclipse. The prince was only sixteen years of age when he ascended the throne, and when he was still young he took two trips abroad. The first was to Singapore and Java in 1870, and the second to India and Burma in 1871. Travelling abroad broadened the young King's mind considerably and this translated into tremendous benefits to the country later on<sup>(2)</sup>.

When the King became 20, he spent a brief period as a Buddhist monk, and then started to lay a new order for the economy. He standardized taxation and established the Ratsadakorn Pipat Hall to function as the revenue collecting arm of the government. The first modern bank notes were also printed in 1880, and the Department of Bank Notes was set up in 1889. The currency system was changed to the Baht and Satang system which is in use today. He also established the Siam Commercial Bank as the first commercial bank owned by Thais. He proclaimed the Gold Standard Act in order to declare gold as the support of the new currency. The first modern state budget also came into being during his reign. This represented the first time personal assets of the monarch and those of the state were clearly separated<sup>(3)</sup>. However, the King often gave funds out of his own personal belongings to help his people. This shows that he genuinely cared for his subjects.

King Chulalongkorn's greatest achievement is the abolition of slavery without any bloodshed or violent conflicts. He declared that children of slaves would be free after they turned 21 and progressively reduced the prices that slaves had to pay in order to free themselves. He forbade buying and selling of human beings in 1868, and in 1909 he signed into law the prohibition of slavery, which formally signified the end of slavery in the country. It took him over 35 years to do so<sup>(2)</sup>.

King Chulalongkorn intended that every class of his subjects should have the opportunity to go to school. Thus, he set up the Mahannapharam School, which was the first public school in the kingdom. He also established the Saowapha School as the first school for girls. As for higher and vocational education, he set up the Royal Pages School in order to train those who would become civil servants. The school was then upgraded to Chulalongkorn University by his son and heir King Rama VI or King Vajiravudh. He also set up schools for agriculture and the military. He sent many of his sons, as well as those of his civil

servants, to Europe to further their studies using personal funds<sup>(2,3)</sup>. The Department of Education was established in 1887; this agency eventually became the Ministry of Education and remains so today.

In the past it was very difficult for Thais to communicate with one another, due to the difficult terrain and lack of infrastructure. The King ordered the establishment of the Department of Telegraph in 1869 and the Department of Post in 1881. He also built many roads in Bangkok and created a stir when he bought bicycles, European-style horse drawn carriages and motor cars to ply Bangkok's streets. He also ordered lines of street cars to be built. For longer distances he established the national railway system. The country's first railroad was between Bangkok and Nakhon Ratchasima<sup>(2,3)</sup>.

Then in 1892 the King put into place the modern bureaucratic system of administration which is essentially the system in use today. This was to distribute power to his ministers. He established the Ministry of Justice in 1891 as well as improved the country's judicial system. He set up the Law School in 1897, which eventually became the Faculty of Law, Chulalongkorn University<sup>(2,4,5)</sup>.

Due to his realization of the importance of the European powers and the need to learn from them as much as possible, the King took two more trips abroad, in 1897 and 1902. He continuously developed the country and set up the country's first modern power system. He also abolished the old tradition of requiring his subjects to prostrate themselves and to crawl about, and replace those with the European tradition of standing and bowing<sup>(2,3)</sup>.

Scanning his brief biography as mentioned above, there is, thus, little doubt as to why the Thai people continue to revere the King as much as they do. The influential Time Magazine also declared him to be one of the 20th century most influential Asians. He was the beloved monarch who took the country out of the jaws of the colonial powers.

### His Majesty The King's Activities in Medicine and Public Health

King Chulalongkorn's activities concerning medicine and public health are:

1. He followed the policy of his predecessor King Rama III and his father King Rama IV by providing freedom to his subjects to practice religions. As a result the Christian missionaries had considerable freedom to practice their religions and to do charity work. Missions from the United States came to Siam

during the reign of King Rama III led by Dr. Dan Beach Bradley. During the reign of King Chulalongkorn, another modern hospital was set up in Phetchaburi by Dr. EA. Sturge in 1880. Then the Bangkok Nursing Home and Saint Louis Hospital were set up by the British Community and French Catholic Mission. These together with hospital owned by the Chinese were the most advanced Western style hospitals in the kingdom at the time(6).

2. The King also initiated the establishment of royal hospitals to treat sufferers of cholera. In July 1881, an epidemic of cholera broke out in Bangkok and its environs; the King asked for the help of members of the royal family and senior ranking noblemen to set up 48 small hospitals in various regions throughout Bangkok. This was the first time there was a systematic management of medicine and public health. The hospitals functioned for two months until the epidemic subsided. The King presented medals and certificates to all who helped him in this regard. However, after the epidemic ended these 48 hospitals were then abandoned(3).

3. The King established a permanent royal hospital for the people. The King cared so much for the people, especially those who were least able to afford it, that he proposed the idea of setting up a permanent public hospital. In March 22, 1886, he ordered a committee consisting of noblemen and mem-

bers of the royal family to procure a piece of land and to construct a permanent hospital. The committee met inside the Grand Palace and resolved that a plot of land belonging to the Krom Praratchawangbowon-sathanpimuk (Wang Lang) on the west bank of the Chao Praya was suitable to set up a hospital. The King then set out 16,000 baht from his personal fund to build 3 large houses, 3 small houses as a hospital, which were connected to the former through a patio. While the construction was going on, one of his sons Prince Siriraj Kakutphan became sick with amoebic dysentery and died when he was only 1 year and 7 months old. After the funeral of the Prince and Prince Pahurat Maneemai who died in the same period, the King and Queen Saowapha bequeathed houses and furniture to the hospital and then officially named it "Siriraj Hospital". The hospital opened in 1888 and still functions today(7).

4. The King set up the first medical school. During the Ayutthaya period there used to be Western-style hospital that came with the activities of the European missions. St. Joseph's Hospital was set up during the reign of King Narai. However, after the death of King Narai and the ensuing riots, the hospital was destroyed(6). In the reign of King Chulalongkorn, the committee for construction of hospitals chaired by Prince Damrongrajanuphap wrote a letter asking the King's permission to train new doctors accord-

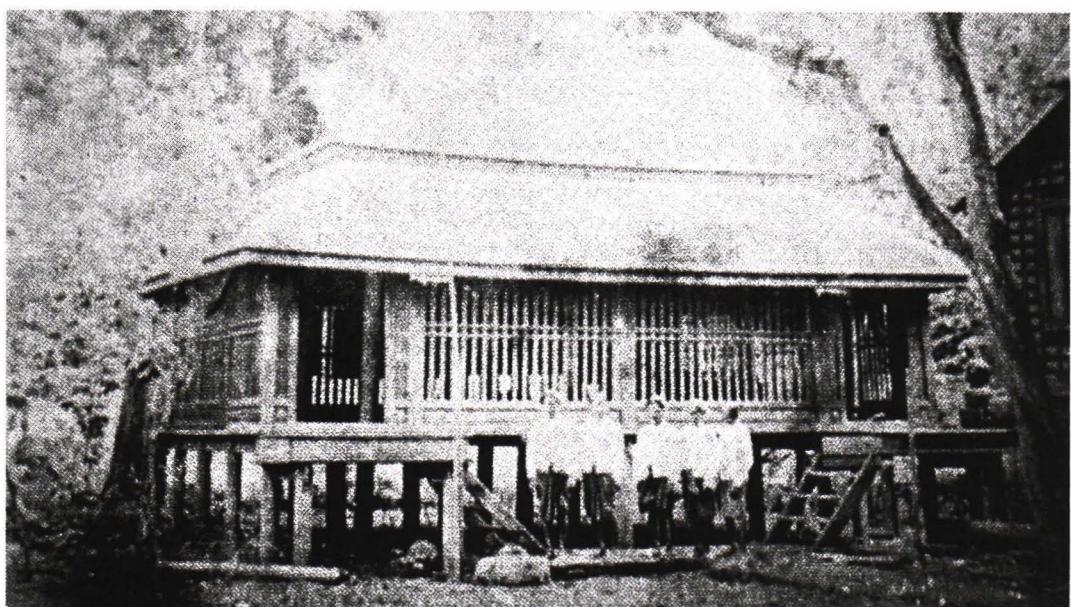


Fig. 1. Temporary hospital during epidemic of cholera in the reign of King Chulalongkorn.

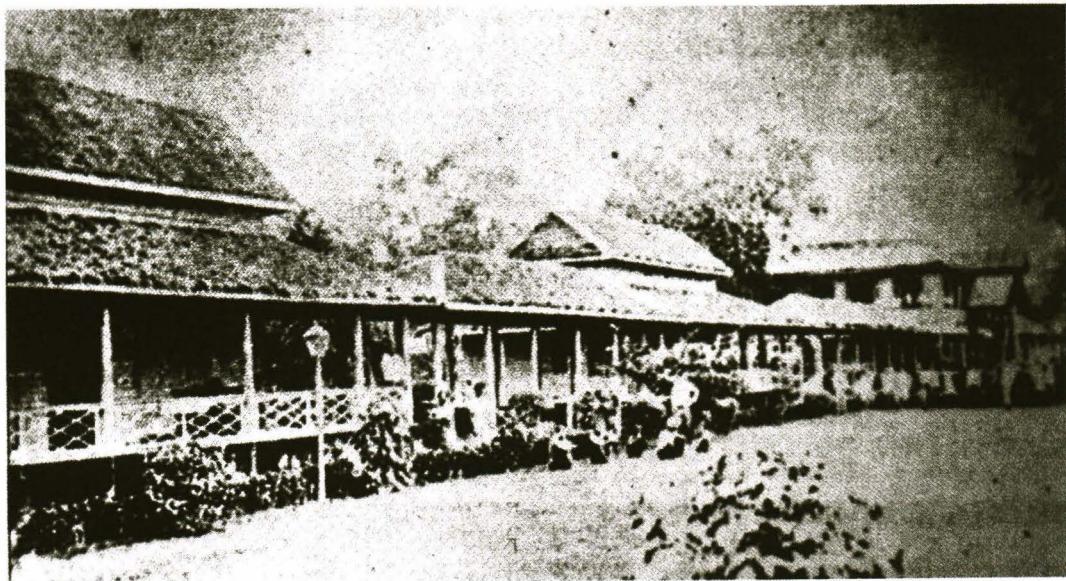


Fig. 2. Siriraj Hospital in early phase.



Fig. 3. King Chulalongkorn Memorial Hospital in the early phase.

ing to the European system. The committee resolved to employ Dr. T. Heyward Hays, who could speak Thai, to be the first medical teacher. The King gave his royal permission in 1889, and modern medical subjects were first taught on September 5, 1890 at

Siriraj Hospital. King Chulalongkorn continuously improved and cared for the hospital. He went to open the Royal Medical School in 1890(7). This school later became the first medical faculty in the original four faculties of Chulalongkorn University set up by King

Vajiravudh. This faculty then became the Faculty of Medicine at Siriraj Hospital<sup>(7)</sup>, Mahidol University and remains as today.

5. Establishment of the Thai Red Cross. The event which led to the founding of The Thai Red Cross was the 1893 incident, when French ships violated Siamese sovereignty and landed warships on the bank of the Chao Praya River demanding the ceding of a very large tract of land on the left bank of the Mekhong River. This was the most serious incident in the reign of the King, and the one most likely for the country to lose its sovereignty. Before the incident, France had spread its influences to Vietnam and there was a conflict between the French, Vietnamese and Siamese leading to some deaths of all three. The French government was very displeased and then sent warships to the Siamese waters. The Siamese at the fort at the mouth of the Chao Praya tried to fire warning shots but the French ships took no notice. So there was a fierce fighting. Many Siamese soldiers lost their lives, while the French lost only one of their sailors. The incident shook the population terribly. Those who were soldiers thought of fighting and there was a mobilization of troops and reserves. The ensuing talks ended with Siam agreeing to pay 3 million baht for damages to France, and Siam had to ceding the territory on the left bank of the Chao Praya. France would then seize Chantaburi as insurance. However, after Siam paid all the damages and ceded the territory, France refused to return Chanthaburi. It was not until ten years after the incident that France finally left Chantaburi but then they took Trat instead. Siam had to cede more territory-this time the Cambodian region of Battambang, Sri Sophon and Siam Reap-before France finally returned Trat. Many soldiers were injured during the incident, but there was no organization that took care of them directly. Many Siamese noble ladies, led by Lady Plian Phassakornwong, asked Queen Sawangwattana to ask the King's per-

mission to found the Siamese Red Cross. This would function through donations from the ordinary people and would care for the sick and wounded, and to set up hospitals. The King gave his permission and asked Queen Sawangwattana to act as the Founder and Queen Saowapha as the president. This was the starting point of the Thai Red Cross<sup>(8)</sup>.

When King Vajiravudh Rama VI was a prince, he visit Japan and was much impressed by the hospital managed by the Japanese Red Cross. Thus, when he returned to Siam he wanted to have another hospital that could serve as a training ground for military doctors and nurses. The hospital would then become a hospital managed by the Thai Red Cross in the future. When King Chulalongkorn died on October 23, 1910, 43 of his children, led by King Vajiravudh, made merit by donating the sum of 122,910 baht to create a hospital on the plot of land owned by the King. The original building was designed by the same Italian architect who also designed the Ananta-samakhom Throne Hall. Modern equipment and many famous doctors were also found for the hospital. The King gave the hospital the title of "King Chulalongkorn Memorial Hospital" in order to commemorate the role of his father. This hospital then became the site of the Faculty of Medicine, King Chulalongkorn Memorial Hospital, University of Medical Sciences. This then became the Faculty of Medicine, Chulalongkorn University at present<sup>(8)</sup>. So both Chulalongkorn University and Chulalongkorn Hospital were two of the great monuments dedicated to the Great King. These monuments, however, do not merely function as monuments; they have continued, to serve the Thai people tremendously until today. On the auspicious occasion of the 150th anniversary of King Chulalongkorn's birth, this article were then act as a reminder of the activities of the Great King in medicine and public health, which are not by any means lesser in importance than his activities in other areas.

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