

## **The encounter between Italy and Siam at the dawn of the twentieth century: Italian artists and architects in the modernising Kingdom of Siam**

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This paper focuses on the encounters between Italy and Siam at the dawn of the twentieth century, as it was the most dynamic period of Italian settlement in the modernising Siam. The paper analyses the development of Siamese modernisation as a challenging opportunity for Italian entrepreneurs and professionals, thanks to a healthy diplomatic relation between the two countries. Compared to the main characteristics of the Italian diaspora, the Italian colony in Siam stands out because of the fruits of its creative production. Siam was described as a symbol of tradition, not very different from the way China was often viewed, while the West was regarded as a source of modernity. With this perspective, the fact that Siam herself initiated the modernisation process, as well as the recruitment of Italians as part of the government's team in public works, architectural construction and civil engineering, was emphasised less than the part played by Italians in transforming the image of the Siamese capital. The paper examines how the encounters between Italy and Siam developed, attempting to do this from both Siamese and Italian perspectives, since both shared cultural memories, empirical evidence of cultural encounters and transculturality.

**Keywords:** Italy-Asia; Italian-Thai; Siamese modernisation; cultural encounters; Italians in Asia.

### **Introduction: the West as the source of Siamese modernisation**

Looking back at the geopolitics of high imperialism in Asia, from the second half of the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, we can see how the changing wind of world politics obliged the kingdom of Siam to make a move. When neighbouring states were all ruled by colonial powers – the British Empire in Asia and the French in Cochin China – it was quite a challenge for Siam to deal with predictable threats on each unclear border and the rising influence of the colonial West. The preservation of Siam's sovereignty was, without doubt, a concern to the absolute monarch and most of the Siamese political elite, particularly in the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1868–1910).

King Chulalongkorn was often depicted by the contemporary European press as an 'enlightened' man when referring to his attitude towards modernisation or Westernisation. The strategic process of reform and modernisation was developed as a crucial state policy under his reign, pushing forward a large number of changes and reforms with a strong focus on the West as the source of progress and modern 'civilisation'. This was the key move in withstanding the

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strong waves of colonialist influence throughout Asia. King Chulalongkorn's visits to Singapore, British India (Myanmar and India) and Java between 1870 and 1873 provided an eye-opening experience for him as he observed the situation of those lands and their peoples under European domination (Chulalongkorn 1925). Since that early period of his reign, Chulalongkorn adopted a visible position in the international diplomatic arena, opening a dialogue with the visiting governors of the colonial West. The king's later official visit to Europe in 1897 confirmed his position as the main protagonist of Siamese modernisation. The government of Siam focused on progress and reform, though it sometimes struggled with opposing standpoints or conflicts of ideas or interests within the country.

The king's decision to embody 'civilisation' as defined by the colonial West was the key agent for the country's advancement, as it was thoughtfully planned and significantly implemented over decades at the turning-point of Siamese history, in an attempt to achieve the position of a modern state in Asia. The progressive attitude of the king and the Siamese political elite was part of their dialogue with their European counterparts. Englehart calls this an act of subversion, or 'representing civilisation to those who defined its standards' (2010, 424). The tangible fashion choices of the Siamese royalty and aristocrats, as well as their possession of Western objects and artworks, produced an image of the Siamese monarchy as modern and civilised (Peleggi 2002). Being able to accomplish 'what the standard of civilisation usually prevented: the inclusion of non-Europeans in international society on equal terms', the Siamese royalty and aristocrats were accepted as 'civilised' persons by Europeans, which 'implied the acceptance of the kingdom they ruled as a member of "civilised" international society' (Englehart 2010, 424). The anomalous case of Siam as the only independent state in the Southeast Asian region can be examined and debated from various perspectives and standpoints, bearing in mind that Siam was still under the global influence of European imperialism. Thus, Siam could be considered modernised and culturally self-colonised in order to cope with the rising colonial influence and the pressing situation of geopolitics and identity transformation that was forming in the interconnected world.

The official visits of King Chulalongkorn and his entourage to every European state and Russia in 1897 captured the attention of the European press throughout his long sojourn of almost six months. The long journey away from home was a genuine quest to experience first-hand the source of what Europeans defined as civilisation (Winichakul 2000, 539). State affairs were still of concern to the king during his 1897 trip – particularly relations with France after the Franco-Siamese conflict of 1893. In 1907, however, the king was less anxious about the political threats, as the ratification of the Franco-Siamese treaty was settled during this second European sojourn when the French agreed to eliminate extraterritorial rights over their native subjects resident in Siam. These two visits to Europe, in 1897 and 1907, were mentioned by historians as strong evidence of Chulalongkorn's modern attitude and of Siamese modernisation, but in fact, many important projects and diplomatic affairs had already been launched and developed many years before. The reciprocal exposure and continued interaction between these two different cultures, once foreign and unusual, yielded a stronger connection between the Siamese elite and their European counterparts and a better understanding of each other. In King Chulalongkorn's letters from Europe (1897) to Queen Saowapha, acting as the regent of Siam during his absence, he wrote with such detailed description, often with a photographic memory, allowing the queen to conjure up a visual image of his explorations, as he compared what he had experienced to the Siamese ambience and reiterated his social equality with the European royalty.

As regards Italy, at the turn of nineteenth century the country did not play a colonialist role in the Southeast Asian region; instead, Italy came into contact with Siam in a friendly initiative. The Duke of Genoa, Thomas of Savoy – the first European prince to visit the Siamese court, in

1881 – was in Venice to welcome King Chulalongkorn on his arrival in May 1897 (Lohapon 2010, 67, 77). With healthy bilateral relations already established, the king praised Italian art and architecture, and there was empirical evidence of direct contact between the Siamese elite and Italian artistic professionals, which would develop much more strongly in the urban development of Bangkok immediately after the king's return to Siam.

In a letter of 1 June 1897, King Chulalongkorn described with admiration the rendezvous in Florence with the painters of the Macchiaioli school, Michele Gordigiani and Edoardo Gelli, while they were working on the king's commissions, particularly for royal portraits (Lohapon 1999). During his stay in Italy in 1897 and 1907, King Chulalongkorn attended socio-cultural events, and visited the Venice Biennale international art exhibition and several art studios, from where numerous paintings and sculptures were shipped to decorate royal palaces in Bangkok. (See Poshyananda 1993, for the Western-style artworks in the Thai royal court.) Throughout the king's reign, there was outstanding evidence of the encounter between Italy and Siam in the field of Western-style art and architecture. The tangible heritage of this cultural encounter, as seen in numerous modern buildings of that time in Siam, was a crucial message that the country intended to convey to the international community the image of a modernising and independent state. Moving towards the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the kingdom of Siam entered the international arena with an accumulated wealth of cultural investment and cultural diplomacy.

### **Italian mobility en route to Siamese modernisation**

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the capital of Siam already appeared cosmopolitan, a city where transcultural interactions developed via activities and encounters between people from different regions of the world, mostly from Asia, Europe and America. Travel notes of that era recorded Bangkok in various ways, through the perceptions of visitors from different cultural backgrounds, calling the city the capital of the 'Land of the White Elephant' (Vincent 1874) or a 'true tower of Babel' (Fournereau 1998 (1892), 42). The various faces of Bangkok were captured in different shades through the eyes of travellers. Motta, the Italian Foreign Minister, referred to 'every traveller and writer' noting that Bangkok at first sight was not like a Siamese city, but a Chinese one (1903, 4), while Salvatore Besso, a journalist from Rome, specified that the Chinese quarter of Bangkok reminded him of Canton, but a more Venetian Canton (2006, 32). The differences of perception of Siam among travellers in those years can be vividly seen. The 'Chinese Bangkok' (Smyth 1999, 17) existed alongside other settlements in the city, since 'there are many Bangkoks' including 'the European Bangkok' (Smyth 1999, 10). Fournereau described Bangkok as 'an absolutely cosmopolitan city': all the races of Asia were represented, and the European colonies, listed in order of numerical importance, were English, Germans, Italians, Danish, Dutch, Portuguese, French and finally Spanish (1892, 42).

The city was then at the very moment of its greatest openness, in ways that would support the development of its new socio-cultural image, as the Siamese government moved further with new projects to cope with modernity and progress. Opportunities were widely available to newcomers from any country, but with more advantage for those who were under the extraterritorial protection of bilateral treaties. In order to prevent a monopoly of any nation, the checks and balances between foreign partners in Siam became an important part of the game, since the Siamese were concerned that the West might not be completely trusted, and that extraterritoriality was an unfair agreement. The economy of modernisation was appealing enough to Italians who became part of the international community in Bangkok, starting with a small number who settled and set up businesses

or worked in the government offices some years after the ratification of the treaty between Italy and Siam (1870).<sup>1</sup>

Though the nineteenth century was a period of high Italian emigration – mainly caused by economic difficulty and poverty as the country's economy was not yet on a par with European industrialised countries – the movement of Italians towards Asian regions was different from the typical Italian diaspora to other parts of the world. A large number of Italians left their homeland seeking fortune and opportunity, particularly in the Americas. Italians were commonly known then as 'workers of the world' (Gabaccia 1999, 12), but looking East, there was another completely different story. Siam, like other Asian countries, was not on the list of lands that attracted Italian labour. (On Italian emigration, see Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali 2002.) The small yet productive community of Italians in Bangkok was formed mostly of merchants, entrepreneurs, professional architects, civil engineers and established artists (Figure 1). Because the impact they made as Siam turned towards modernity and because they enjoyed the patronage of the royals, they were described as Italians at the Siamese court who contributed greatly to the country's art and architecture. Their stories often sounded fictional, because of their connection to the royal court or the exotic Siam.

In this moment when great projects were planned with the positive idea of modernity and renovation, mainly supported by the royal court and the Siamese government, it was clear that skilled manpower would be necessary. However, in Siam the higher education institutions were still in the process of reform (see Wyatt 1969 on education in the reign of King Chulalongkorn). The first university in Siam – Chulalongkorn University, with a mission to develop modern education in the country – was not established until 1917, so the Siamese government recruited skilled professionals mostly from Europe. New disciplines and Western technologies were imported along with the ongoing development. In the kingdom of Siam, a small Italian community gradually grew up alongside the development of the capital city, not as an industrialised city but as a city moving towards modernity, a modernity inspired by both the renovation of artistic and architectural culture in Siam and the creation of different styles inspired by Western art and architecture.

Italian professionals became quite outstanding in the shaping of modernity and progress, in which the new urban development played a significant role. The most visible and recognised area of participation by Italians in the Siamese modernisation, compared to that of other foreign colonies, was in the architectural and artistic arena. In this timeframe, between the last three decades of the nineteenth century and the first three decades of the twentieth century, the Italian colony can be characterised in two major groups: the architectural contractors (1870s–early 1890s) and the professionals in government service (late 1890s–early 1930s). Both were protagonists in the construction of Western-style state buildings and royal palaces. King Chulalongkorn clearly positioned himself as the prominent supporter of modern urbanisation and architectural construction, a stance that was vigorously upheld by his son and successor, King Vajiravudh (1910–1925).

King Chulalongkorn's official visits (1870–1873) to the colonised lands in Asia, the Dutch East Indies (the present-day Indonesia) and British India, confirmed in him the necessity to prompt the modernisation of the independent Siam. The young king observed the submissiveness of the local Javanese people under the colonial power, as well as the great difference in attitude and social status between the colonisers and the colonised (Chulalongkorn 1925). He also observed the modern architecture in the colonial compounds in Java and India. Being aware of the colonialist threat, he noted in detail, through observant eyes, what he experienced during those visits. After those journeys, the intention to modernise his country was clearly set as his key mission, one which was to be carried out throughout his 42-year reign.



Figure 1. Italian architects and engineers with Ferdinando of Savoy, Prince of Udine in Bangkok (1906).

During the same period, with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, more ships started to navigate the Asian region, and that movement facilitated more connections between cultures and peoples. The increasing demands in Bangkok for Western-style buildings and European decorations attracted more merchants, entrepreneurs and professionals from Europe to Siam. Italian architects then had just established their businesses in Bangkok and started to gain great opportunities because of the rising demand for Western-style architecture. They were particularly aware of new projects commissioned by the king and the government of Siam.

During the first stage of state and royal architectural projects, both the king and the Siamese government sponsored a series of architectural buildings in Western style, from the royal residences at Bang Pa In Palace (1872–1878), to several buildings for new government offices and villas of the royal princes in Bangkok (1873–1890). The Italian entrepreneurs – newcomers to Siam in the 1870s and 1880s – appeared to be quite strong in bidding for large-scale projects against previous contractors, mostly Siamese and Chinese, due to the increasing demand for Western-style architecture (National Archives of Thailand, R.5NK.21/137, 1882). The archives and historical documents of the most established contractors show that there was strong competition in the 1880s (National Archives of Thailand, R.5NK15/63; R.5NK15/286, 1882) between Grassi Brothers & Co and Stefano Cardu & Co. (on the two architects see Povatong 2005, 9–80, 110–37; Lohapon 2007, 149–168). The architecture of public spaces as seen in the city landscape at the end of the century – for example, the Court of Justice, the Post Office, the new Custom House, Siriraj hospital buildings, the Royal Barracks, the Cavalry Barracks, or even the new prison in Bangkok – proved the strongest achievements of Grassi Brothers, led by Gioachino Grassi, the architect known among the Siamese elite as the ‘Italian architect’ or the ‘Italian under the French subject’ (he held Austrian/French nationality) after the increasing tension between Siam and France.<sup>2</sup>

In this timeframe of six decades, the Italian contribution to Siamese architectural modernisation was briefly interrupted twice, firstly amid the intensified conflict between Siam and France, which resulted in the belligerent 'Paknam Incident' of 1893, and again during the First World War. While it is true that economic development was affected and mostly suspended in such circumstances, both interruptions proved temporary in the drive towards Siamese modernisation, which was resumed after both incidents.

The first period of Italian entrepreneurs declined in 1892–1893 during the crisis between France and Siam, when most businesses in Bangkok were slowing down and, in some cases, interrupted. The effect was clear enough particularly for a French subject like Grassi, as he lamented in his farewell letter to Prince Devawongse, minister of foreign affairs, that there would not be much work for his company from the Siamese government and that was the reason for his departure from his 'adopted country' (Lohapon 2007, 165; Lohapon 2010, 97). After two decades as the most established architectural contractor in Bangkok, Grassi decided to leave Siam only a few days before the cannon fire at the river delta on 13 July 1893, right in front of the 'Chulachomklao Fortress', developed for Siam by Grassi himself. This was considered the most threatening incident for Siam during the Franco-Siamese crisis. The liquidation of Grassi Brothers & Co may have been of benefit to other Italian contractors, who had for at least a few years more opportunity to win state projects, as the government was at the juncture of significant changes.

After King Chulalongkorn's announcement in 1892 on administration reform and reorganisation of ministries, the government started to move commissions for architectural projects from private contractors to state architects and engineers. A new opportunity was then opened to the second successful period of the Italian colony, chiefly in the same fields of art and architecture, this time under the new Ministry of Public Works.<sup>3</sup> Carlo Allegri and Paolo Remedi, for example, left the business of Grassi Brothers & Co when it closed to continue their professional career under the Ministry. Carlo Allegri, with his years of experience in civil engineering in the area, would soon be trusted by the government to lead the new team of young architects and engineers who would be gradually called to Bangkok, beginning shortly after the return of King Chulalongkorn from his visit to Europe in 1897. Even though King Chulalongkorn and his entourage had direct contacts with other European countries, the new team of architects and engineers remained mostly Italians, who would be trusted for the upcoming projects of art and architecture in the Siam of the early twentieth century.

Apart from Allegri and Remedi, there was no direct connection between the former contractors and the new team of professionals under contract to the Siamese government. Allegri's name, however, was mentioned on several occasions, when the government was searching for a qualified candidate for architectural projects and artistic decorations. Other craftsmen were sought via recommendation for specific tasks: such was the case with the artist Cesare Ferro, who in 1902 was entrusted to decorate the Amphon Sathan Villa. Peleggi (2002, 83) likens the case of Siam to several other countries, citing the Russian transformation of Moscow and St Petersburg and the Japanese introduction of formal art training in the early Meiji era, where Italian artists and architects were employed because of their 'professional reputation and ideal descent from the Renaissance masters'. The glory of the Italian Renaissance and Baroque architecture may have been the main inspiration for St Petersburg's development as a European city in the early eighteenth century; however it is debatable whether the Siamese modernisation at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries was inspired only by the artistic reputation of the Italian Renaissance. Certainly the reputation of Italian artists and architects since the Renaissance had benefitted them enormously, but in the case of Siam, Italian professionals may have been selected for different reasons.

King Chulalongkorn's admiration of Italian artists was recorded in his correspondence with Queen Saowapha (Lohapon 1999) recalling his sojourn in Florence, where, in addition to the Renaissance heritage, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century the art studios and galleries were prominent in the city. Other European cities allowed the king and his entourage to encounter various aspects of European 'civilisation', while they also observed the grey and dark side of Europe – its poverty and in many cases the fact that it was even 'lacking in civilisation' (Chonchirdsin 2009, 434). The king's epistolary writing on art appreciation contained observations on the poverty of Italy, and even the impoliteness of its people in certain circumstances. The king's decision to entrust Italian architects and engineers, mostly graduates from Turin's institution, with large-scale projects was made after his return to Siam, and that may be linked to the king's admiration of Italian artistic mastery and direct contacts between officers of Siam and their peers in Italy, as well as the connection between the Siamese ministry of public works and Italian institutions, mainly in Turin.

However, another important issue was political concern. The checks and balances between Western nations in the kingdom were carefully considered, as well as the collocation of foreign officers in the Siamese government service and the concessions granted to foreign investors. A later comment of King Chulalongkorn on art (1907), comparing French to Italian artistic mastery, expressed his preference for French monumental sculpture; and during this second and last trip to Europe King Chulalongkorn commissioned his equestrian monument from the French foundry Susse Frères Fondateurs (Chulalongkorn 1923, vol.I, 422). This could be considered the first important commission to French artists after the Franco-Siamese crisis, which seems to have been resolved in 1907 with border changes and the elimination of extraterritoriality for Siamese natives under French subjects. However, throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century, Italians remained prominent in the field of Western art and architecture in Siam.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Turin was considered the most outstanding industrialised city in Italy, with respected higher institutions of modern architecture and engineering. Technological innovation in architectural construction (for example the reinforced concrete of the engineer Giovanni Antonio Porcheddu), along with the Art Nouveau architectural movement that was widespread throughout European capitals, had been introduced to Italy. Turin was chosen by the Siamese government as the main source for its recruitment of skilled professionals to work on the making of modern architecture in Siam. During his sojourn in Turin as the guest of the House of Savoy in June 1897, King Chulalongkorn and his entourage made direct contact with the intellectual elite and vice versa: evidence of their interaction can be found in correspondence and reports related to the search for artists, architects and civil engineers.

Starting in 1898, a new team of architects and engineers was summoned from Turin to Bangkok, to work alongside the expansion of the new royal residence and the new royal citadel Dusit Palace, which until then had been land mainly used for agricultural purposes. From the beginning of the twentieth century, most Italian architects and engineers in the Siamese department of public works were in fact alumni of Turin's colleges – architects from Albertina Academy of Fine Arts (Lupo 1996) and engineers from the Technical School for Engineers or later the Royal Turin Polytechnic. (On the contact between Siamese government and the colleges in Turin, see Lohapon 2010, 111–113; Filippi 2008, 49–50). Archival documents recorded the lament of the minister of public works, Phraya Suriya Nuvatr, in 1905, who stated that the young Italian architects know how to draw, but they did not have practical skills of architectural construction when compared with the Chinese competence in masonry (National Archives of Thailand, 1905). It would be challenging for the Italian architects under the Siamese government, graduates of the academy of fine arts, to prove their proficiency in this new territory of work. The



Figure 2. Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall at its completion (1916).

competition was obvious among different groups of foreigners in the Siamese field of architecture and civil engineering. Before a final project could be approved by the patron or the commissioner, several designs and sketches were studied and proposed. Modifications were requested to be completed before or sometimes even after the realisation – for example in the case of the Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall (Figure 2), for which there were several proposals for the architectural design to be amended before the final draft was approved by King Chulalongkorn, and the frescoes were partly modified by the order of King Vajiravudh a few months after their creation by Galileo Chini (Lohapon, 2008, 50–51).

At the dawn of the twentieth century, this second generation of Italian professionals assisted the Siamese government in developing several public architecture and infrastructure projects for the capital city and other regions of Thailand (such as bridges over the rivers in the northern cities of Chiang Mai and Lampang, and the city hall and roads in Phuket). Following plans as approved by the local government, they adopted modern engineering technology and new materials of construction, as opposed to the masonry technique commonly used for earlier buildings in Western style. The new team of Italian engineers adopted the most innovative technology of reinforced concrete (Figure 3) for large-scale architecture such as the Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall (1908–1916). (See Filippi 2008, 126–140 on the introduction of reinforced concrete in Bangkok.) Architectural design and construction in early twentieth-century Bangkok would be further developed thanks to the urban expansion and the development of new royal compounds,



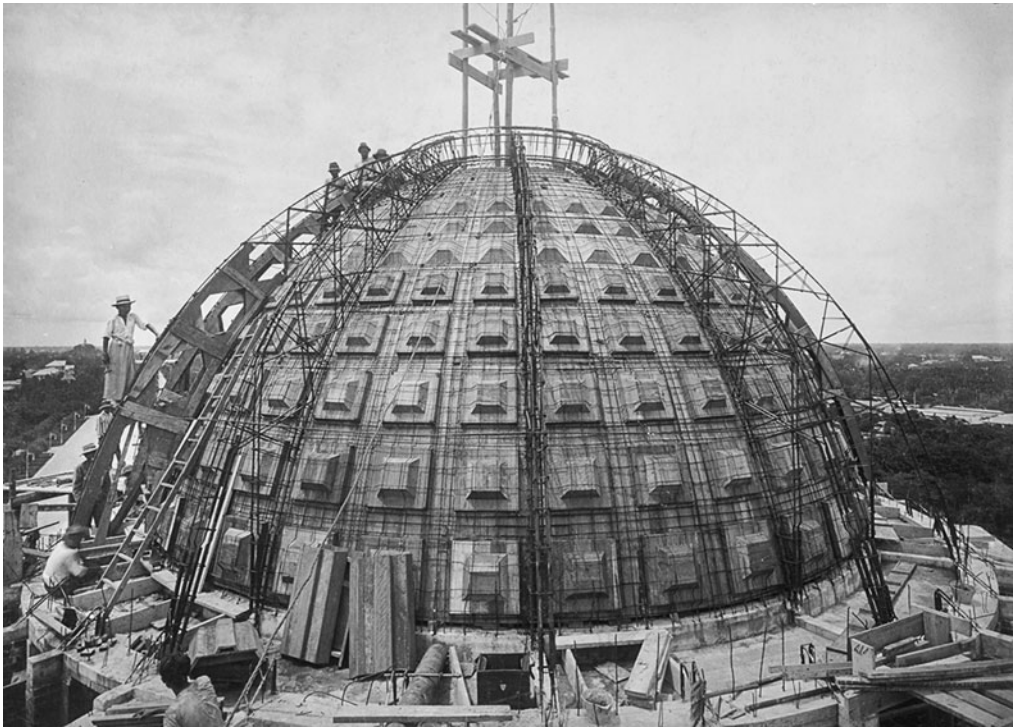


Figure 3. Reinforced-concrete dome of Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall under construction (c. late 1909).

particularly at Dusit Palace, as well as the introduction of new social spaces in the city, e.g. sport clubs, stores, colleges, hospitals, banks, libraries and train stations. The inclusion of Western-style architecture in Siamese social spaces accompanied the main development of modern services and infrastructures (Figure 4).

Because most of these projects were supported and commissioned by the king or the government, the team of Italian architects and engineers was working mainly for the state and the royal court with only a few private commissions. In other words, their professional life did not involve them much with the general public, who would after all be the users of the above-mentioned public services. The artistic and architectural creations have been highlighted as tangible evidence of the transcultural process of modernisation. The Siamese quest for modernity was conceptual and politically necessary at the beginning, but then it was linked to an openness towards different forms of culture – the foreignness was accepted as a means to reinvent a new culture, contrasting with the usual pattern of the past. The Italian team had served the increasing demand for a modernised lifestyle in Siam with their competence in Western-style architecture and the transfer of artistic mastery, while learning and forming their expertise through different forms of culture in Siam.

It was clear that as regards the architectural projects, they worked as a team composed of architects, engineers, draftsmen, artists, decorators of different masteries and technical assistants; and they were often recognised among Siamese colleagues and supervisors as the ‘Chang Italian’, as they are called in this paper ‘Italian professionals’. Individual contributions, at the same time, merged into the work of the team, and that was how they have been mostly remembered,



Figure 4. A changing landscape of waterways in Bangkok after the opening of Phan Fa Lilat bridge (1907).

until recent studies attempted to identify individual participants. Some individuals stood out from the team, such as Emilio Giovanni Gollo, whose engineering studies on the site of Ananta Samakhom throne hall were recorded as the key solution to the critical problem of its heavy structure, which had caused the sinking of the entire edifice during its construction. That achievement was celebrated by his colleagues in a heroic tone (Allegrì 1911, 9; Lohapon 2000, 54–61). Mario Tamagno – the most active figure among the architects – was the one who signed off most large-scale and important projects. Archival documents, including original architectural designs and blueprints, confirmed his role as the architect who helped transform early twentieth-century Bangkok's landscape during his 26 years in Siam (Tamagno 1926).

Galileo Chini was another exceptional case; his voyage to Siam and the direct encounter with different colours, patterns and styles of Asian culture was a significantly big step in his personal and professional life. The commission to create frescoes at Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall in Bangkok – a large-scale architectural decoration – can be considered as a life-changing opportunity for the Florentine artist. Through this opportunity, which was so rare for European artists of the early twentieth century, Chini's art inspired by Siam brought the exotic theme of the Orient to the Venice Biennale of 1914.

While Galileo Chini and his Siamese sojourn under the king's patronage was widely studied in Italy, in Thailand today Corrado Feroci tends to overshadow other members of the Italian colony in Bangkok of that era. The Florentine sculptor, known as Professor Silpa Bhirasri, was celebrated as the founder of Thai modern art. His early work under the Siamese government was to design models for new coins, but thanks to the rise of nationalist ideology his major artistic achievements were public monuments. He was highly respected not only for his artistic contribution per se, but for his devotion to the education of his students in Fine Arts that remains of such significance to modern and contemporary artists in Thailand.

During the six decades of the activity of Italian professionals in Siam, only a few of them adopted Siam as their second homeland, even though many remained in Siam for decades before moving back to Europe. Related evidence is preserved in the National Archives of Thailand, but in many cases the memories and stories of their versatile life and work may not be accessible for

various reasons. The author of this article, in addition to studying its historical aspects, is attempting to answer the questions of how those scattered repertoires may be documented, organised and connected in such a way that they can be linked and accessible for future studies, as well as how these various mosaics of cultural memories will be preserved. In forthcoming research on the Italian professionals of the early twentieth century, their private archives will have been recovered and studied, having been preserved in a digital form with the highest resolution.

### **Co-creation of cultural memories in the modernised Siam**

It is clear that, in the face of aggression by the colonial powers, Siam decided to invest in the modernisation process, rather than in military power, particularly in public services and infrastructure which were mainly designed to benefit a wide range of people and develop the socio-cultural life of the country. Western-style architecture was chosen as a strategic means to visibly illustrate Siam's quest for progress, and to represent a modern and 'civilised' society according to the European conception. However, the architectural projects reflected a wide range of styles, including neoclassical, neo-Gothic and neo-Renaissance inspirations, along with the more contemporary styles like Art Nouveau and Art Deco – an eclecticism that showed a Siam open to the most inspiring forms of different art and culture, and which reflected a breaking down of traditional boundaries in art and architecture (Figure 5). Among the many elements of progress, electrical systems were installed as new sources of road and building illumination and in some cases as part of architectural decoration.

In the fin-de-siècle movement in Italy, debate on renovation and searches for new artistic form and style was at the centre of attention among artists. The search for modernity and progress was of concern, as major industrial Italian cities grew out of the former agricultural society. In addition to the avant-garde movement of Futurism, modern social spaces were developed with different architectural designs, while new materials like iron and glass were commonly used to give a modern touch to neoclassical architecture. New lifestyles and modern spaces were represented in many cases by Art Nouveau or by eclectic architectural designs, e.g. Turin's Porta Nuova railway station, thermal baths in the cities of Montecatini Terme and Salsomaggiore Terme, and the residential quarter by Gino Coppedè in Rome.

Most of the Italian artists and architects who came to Siam came with that professional background, with repertoires of artistic styles and designs that provided numerous possibilities for interpretation and recreation. Various styles were proposed for modern architecture in Siam. Art Nouveau architecture was adopted and adapted to design new royal residences in Bangkok (e.g. Amphon Sathan Villa for King Chulalongkorn, Bang Khun Phrom palace for Prince Paribatra or today the Bank of Thailand). The grandeur of scale and form could explain why the neoclassical and neo-Renaissance styles were approved by the king for the new Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall, as the building would be used as the main audience hall of the royal citadel Dusit Palace. The materials for construction and architectural decorations were provided and tailor-made by artisans and artistic studios from Italian and European cities. For instance, tons of marble from Carrara were prefabricated and sculpted before they were shipped to and reassembled in Bangkok. The architectural plan and interiors were designed in order to respect the tradition of the Siamese royal court. This long process of construction was carried out with an interesting long-distance collaboration between the two main architects of this project – Mario Tamagno, who worked in Bangkok, and Annibale Rigotti, who was based in Turin. The same method of collaboration was also used for the construction of the Siamese Pavilion at Turin's International Exposition in 1911 by the same architects. The building was constructed in a Siamese style on the bank of



Figure 5. Villa Norasingh in construction (1926), today Thai Government House.

the River Po in order to represent the identity of Siam, with its modern outlook and aesthetic concern.

The choice of architectural styles was not based only on aesthetic values: it plainly conveyed a key message that the modernising Siam was attempting to maintain a dialogue with the European powers. The concept of modernity was delivered, yet Siam still preserved her traditions in a renewed form. Hence, the patterns and customs of Siamese traditions represented the identity of the independent kingdom, and those of Western culture embodied the kingdom's openness to the international community and the spirit of modernity.

The traditional style of art and the original technology of architectural construction in Siam reached a crucial juncture, facing a challenge between conventional mastery and the modern regime of engineering. Several projects provide evidence of the coexistence of traditions and innovations, a combination of old and new forms, which were modified and reinvented. The marble temple Wat Benchamaphobhit is a wonderful example of a project of co-creation between the architectural design of Prince Naris and the construction by the Italian team, which was also responsible for the installation of the marble. Here, the main ordination hall, which traditionally would have been located in the centre of the quadrangle compound with surrounding cloisters, was placed instead in the frontal part with the cloister pushed to the rear of the building. This anomalous layout of a Buddhist temple in Siam reminds one of the architectural arrangement of monasteries with posterior courtyards, mostly seen in Romanesque-Gothic churches of central and northern Italy.



Figure 6. 'Salone Moresco' at the Grand Hotel des Thermes in Salsomaggiore Terme, Italy (2019).

While the marble temple could be cited as an example of transcultural creation, the same observation could be applied to the Italian artistic interpretation of Thai art forms. For instance, the Italian artworks of Galileo Chini, who lived and worked in Bangkok from 1911 to 1913, were significantly inspired by the Oriental style. Besides a series of Oriental paintings, his architectural decorations in the town of Salsomaggiore were outstanding pieces of transcultural art – the Terme Berzieri thermal spa (1922) and the Salone Moresco at the Grand Hotel des Thermes (1926). The vivid ceramic ornaments of Fornaci di San Lorenzo and the colourful murals illustrated the Oriental style and the strong recollection of Siam (Bacchini 1995; Lohapon 2008). The interpretation of Oriental light and colours, as well as figures and forms, reflected the strong transcultural creativity in Chini's work. The artist discovered in the different cultures his unique style of artistic expression (Figure 6).

The transcultural process was developed, in this context, through a mix and match between different styles of art and different kinds of construction materials. The connection between centuries of traditions and modern culture formed an outstanding model of transculturalism, reinventing a new common culture of public spaces and social life, both in Siam and in Italy.

## Conclusion

Instead of fearing the colonialist threat at a time of huge geopolitical changes, the Kingdom of Siam opened itself to a completely different world, in which powerful Westerners took the place of Chinese or Indian merchants. The journeys of King Chulalongkorn to the colonial West in Asia (e.g. the Dutch East Indies and British India) and to Europe, as the king and his

entourage documented, were symbols of crucial adaptation and negotiation, where ‘modern and civilised’ attitudes were of major concern. The travellers brought back to their homeland ideas and plans that encouraged them to invest heavily in turning the country’s vulnerability into strength: hence the crucial role of architecture and modern engineering, which would build a new landscape for the capital city and create a Western appearance. At a time when the rules of the game were set by European colonial powers, Siam opted to launch the creative process of development and modernisation as its solution. Big projects of Western architecture and modern infrastructure were sponsored mainly by the king’s private funds, as well as by the state. This was an unprecedented moment of change for the Kingdom of Siam.

In this process of modernisation, Italians were chosen to participate in the building of modern architecture and in the urbanisation. With their contribution, they were able to earn a reputation in the field of art and architecture, bearing in mind that many of them had started as young graduates. In this period of transition for Siam, the Italians won great commissions and an abundance of important projects. The co-creation of cultural memories, through artistic and architectural projects, proved to be empirical evidence of cultural encounters and transculturality between people from different cultures and remain visible in the artistic and cultural heritage of both Italy and Thailand today.

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### Note on contributor

Neungreudee Lohapon is currently associate professor at Chulalongkorn University; her interests cover different areas in Italian studies, including Italian art history, Italians in Asia and Italian-Thai relations. Her research mainly examines the ‘Italian intellectual colony’, the relationship between Siam and Italy after Italian unification, and the commissions by the kings of Siam to Italian artists, architects and engineers. The interdisciplinary approach of research and development guided her to establish The Arc of Memory Research Unit (<https://www.arcofmemory.arts.chula.ac.th>).

### Notes

1. Diplomatic relations between Italy and Siam were officially established in 1868 with the bilateral Treaty of Friendship and Commerce, ratified in 1870, containing similar provisions as those in most of the earlier treaties signed between the Kingdom of Siam and other European countries, maintaining extraterritoriality and some aspects of trade restriction (Lohapon 2010, 8–13).
2. Architect Gioachino Grassi was born in Capodistria. His father was from Trieste and his mother from Florence. In Capodistria, he designed and built a cemetery for his brother in the Siamese style, while in Bangkok he built a cemetery in the Western style for another brother (this cemetery no longer exists) (Nalesini 2000, 1–34).
3. King Chulalongkorn announced an administration reform in Siam (1892), resulting in 12 ministries. The administration structure was further modified in the reign of King Vajiravudh (1910–1925). Italian artists, architects and engineers, who worked under the Ministry of Public Works, would be transferred to different offices, e.g. under Ministry of the Capital and Department of Sanitary Works.

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### Italian summary

Tra la fine dell'Ottocento e l'inizio del Novecento, in un scenario dominato dalle espansioni imperialiste, il Regno del Siam si indirizzava verso la modernizzazione e il progresso del Paese. In questo scenario, vennero assunti numerosi professionisti italiani, tra cui architetti, ingegneri, pittori, scultori, che si recarono a Bangkok per lavorare al servizio del Governo Siamese. A loro vennero commissionati vari progetti di costruzioni e decorazioni architettoniche, di rinnovamenti urbani e produzioni artistiche di altissimo livello. Questo articolo esamina questo incontro tra due culture diverse, tra l'Italia e il Siam.