

Dr. Prasert Na Nagara (1918 – 2019)



Dr. Prasert Na Nagara and the Ramkhamhaeng Inscription
(photo courtesy of the Fine Arts Department)

On 7 May 2019, Dr. Prasert Na Nagara, Honorary Member of the Siam Society (elected 2001), passed away peacefully at home at the age of just over 100. He was also a member of the Council of the Siam Society from 1965 to 1971.

Dr. Prasert's greatest contribution to the Siam Society was his co-authorship with A.B. Griswold of their Epigraphic and Historical Studies series, the first of which was published in *JSS* 56, 2 (July 1968) and the last, number 24, in *JSS* 67, 2 (July 1979). This corpus of work, spread over ten years, constitutes the basic knowledge of Sukhothai and early Thai history from primary source form of stone inscriptions, transcribed into Roman letters or modern Thai, and translated into English, making it accessible to international readership.

It was a great privilege for me that, during my first honorary editorship of the *JSS* from 1972 to 1976, I edited a number of these Studies. A.B. Griswold would write the first draft, which he delivered to me at the Society or posted to me from Baltimore. I would take it to Dr. Prasert, who was then Permanent Secretary at the ministerial Bureau of University Affairs. He made his corrections and amendments promptly and I conveyed them to Mr. Griswold, who was equally quick with his reply. This process would go on a few times for each Study. When each was satisfied, I would finalise the text for the printer. The proofs were corrected by both authors and me. In this way, I learned a lot about early Thai history and also got to know Dr. Prasert and Mr. Griswold.

After my second honorary editorship of the *JSS* from 1981 to 1985, from abroad

I followed with dismay the so-called “Ram Khamhaeng Controversy”, which erupted between 1987 and 1991. In fact, questions about the dating of Inscription I and of some of its substance, as well as queries about its orthography were not new to Thai historiography, but this time there was denial of its authenticity to the point of calling it a fake. “Epigraphic and Historical Studies No. 9, The Inscription of King Rāma Gamhēn of Sukhodaya (1292 A.D.)”, in *JSS* 59, 2 (July 1971), was questioned. Dr. Prasert’s rebuttals, in Thai and English in various publications, were patient, polite, logical, linguistically and historically sound. Nevertheless, the damage to Inscription I had been done. Dr. Prasert did not seem embittered by the personal attacks on him, regarding them with mild amusement and disdain. He continued with his work for another thirty years.

Prasert Na Nagara was born on 21 March 1918 in Phrae, northern Siam. He belonged to the mighty ruling family of Nakhon Sithammarat, who were semi-hereditary rulers of the city and the surrounding provinces of southern Siam from the latter part of the 18th century until the provincial reforms at the end of the 19th century. His branch of the family had been sent to govern the ancient port town of Takua Pa, now a district in the province of Phang Nga. By the early 20th century, his father was working as a civil servant in the Ministry of Finance in Phrae.

Dr. Prasert was academically gifted, leapfrogging classes in his primary and secondary schools in Phrae and Chiang Mai until he was sent to the prestigious Suan Kulap School in Bangkok, probably the best school in Siam at the time. He won a government scholarship to the University of the Philippines at Los Baños, from which he graduated with a bachelor’s degree in agricultural engineering in 1938.

In 1939, Dr. Prasert started his career as a lecturer at the Agricultural College of the Ministry of Agriculture, which later became Kasetsart University. In the same year, he was posted to the Mae Jo Agricultural College in Chiang Mai, now Mae Jo University. He was back home in northern Siam and in touch with his roots.

Although Dr. Prasert returned to Bangkok in 1944 and spent the rest of his career at Kasetsart University, becoming Professor there in 1960 and Vice President in 1964, he had already begun his study of history during his time at Mae Jo. At a seminar on *Nirat Hariphunchai* in Chiang Mai a number of years ago, convened by the indefatigable Winai Pongsripian, young scholars read the *Nirat* from their laptops, while Dr. Prasert could recite long passages from memory. I asked him when he started to study *Nirat Hariphunchai* and he replied “2486”. I humbly surrendered and told him that was the year I was born: 1943. It was Dr. Prasert who dated *Nirat Hariphunchai* to 1517, revising previous dating by earlier scholars, based on close reading of the text.

Dr. Prasert was an original scholar. His originality sprung from the fact that he was not a historian. His first degree was in agricultural engineering, and he went on to obtain a master’s degree and doctorate in statistics from Cornell University in 1953 and 1957 respectively. He was reputed to be the first Thai with a doctorate in statistics. His interest in history began when he was at Mae Jo Agricultural College for five years and commenced his study of *Nirat Hariphunchai*. He started reading transcriptions of stone inscriptions by George Coedès when he was at Cornell. His moment of calling came when he asked himself what would happen when Coedès passed away. Who was going

to read the inscriptions? He came up with the answer that it would have to be Dr. Prasert himself. He thereafter taught himself ancient Khmer, ancient Thai, and other ancient languages of the region, as well as regional dialects and their variants.

By 1964, Dr. Prasert was confident enough to address a letter to Coedès in Paris presenting an alternative reading of a word in line 15 of the “Sumanakuta inscription”. Coedès famously replied: “I thank you very much for calling my attention upon my wrong reading, and I am ready to examine any other suggestion you might have to make.” Coedès’ gracious reply inspired Dr. Prasert to be equally generous for the rest of his life.

The legendary meeting at Sukhothai in 1960, reputed to be the first modern archaeological seminar in Thailand, launched Dr. Prasert on his historical career. It was here that he was recognised as the new star of early Thai history. His edition of *Nirat Hariphunchai* was first published that year. He was inducted into the circle of Thai experts and probably introduced to A.B. Griswold by Kraisri Nimmanahaeminda at that event. This bore fruit in their collaboration, which might have started not long after their first meeting when they began to work together on a transcription and translation of the *Mangraiayasat* some time before 1965. In any case, the partnership became a fixture from the appearance of the first Epigraphic and Historical Study in the *JSS* of July 1968.

The amazing thing was that Dr. Prasert was doing historical work in his spare time, as a hobby. While he was a full-time university lecturer and administrator, rising to be Vice President in 1964, he became the first Permanent Secretary of the Bureau of University Affairs in 1972, retiring after seven years in 1979. During all that time, he made significant contributions to the advancement of knowledge in Thai history. Apart from his work on the inscriptions, on his own and with A.B. Griswold, he was revising historical dates, the most famous of which took place in 1967 when he revised the date of the founding of Ayutthaya to 4 March 1351, and not 1350 as previously thought. He based his calculation on his knowledge of calendrical systems and on *Recreations in Mathematics* by H.E. Licks (first published 1917). From then on, he deployed his mathematical expertise to solve the problem of the exact dates of several other important events in Thai history.

Apart from his outstanding historical work, Dr. Prasert was also a poet, in that he wrote lyrics for songs. Starting in 1946, he wrote the Thai lyrics for His Majesty the late King’s composition, *Near Dawn*. This was followed by his lyrics for *H.M. Blues*. These were his own lyrics written to His Majesty’s melodies; they were so perfect that they are now embedded in the national memory. The next two were translations of His Majesty’s English lyrics for *Still on my Mind* and *Echo*. The last lyric he wrote for His Majesty was for the royal composition for the Kasetsart University song in 1966. That same year, he even won the Golden Record award for his lyrics, written with His Highness Prince Chakraphan Phensiri, *Fak Rak* (ฝากรัก). Incidentally he also wrote the English lyrics for the anthem, *Oh, Asian Games*. As with his other expertise, he taught himself Western musical notation.

After 1979, Dr. Prasert had nearly forty years of active retirement. Over those years, he must have been a member of more than fifty national councils and committees. He became Chairman of Council of both his old universities, Mae Jo and Kasetsart. He

taught at all the major national universities. He was a founding member of the Statistics Society of Thailand and Chairman of the Mathematics Society of Thailand. For many years, he was Chairman of the Royal Institute and the National Historical Commission. He was very conscientious in attending meetings, going to them by bus until his early 90s. The story is told that early one morning during the rush hour, he fell off a bus. Luckily, the driver stopped and went round to see how he was, he said he was all right and that the driver should drive on immediately otherwise the other passengers would be late for work. Afterwards, the authorities sent a car to fetch and send him home.

After I retired from the Foreign Ministry at the beginning of 2004, I joined Dr. Prasert at the National Historical Commission, renewing our acquaintance from the Siam Society. He was as kind as ever, and even attended subcommittee meetings which I chaired. At plenary meetings of the Commission, after the regular agenda, he asked for papers to be presented on special topics. As editor, I have published some of the relevant ones in the 2019 reprint of the *History of the Rattanakosin Era First to Third Reign* (in Thai).

Dr. Prasert was always ready to revise. He expressed to me more than once his regret that he had not had the opportunity to correct his coinage of “stepped rice fields” (นาขั้นบันได) for the terraced rice fields of northern Thailand to what he later discovered is the native name for them, “folded rice-fields” (นาพับ). He would be pleased that his reading of “The Inscription of Wat Pra Yün,” *Epigraphic and Historical Studies*, No. 13, *JSS* 62, 1 (January 1974) has been superseded by Winai Pongsripian’s re-reading in 2019.

Dr. Prasert’s last visit to the Siam Society was on Sunday 17 March 2019 when he attended the 90th birthday tea party for *Thanphuying* Warunyupha Snidvongse. They had been comrades in the study of Thai history for a very long time and Thanphuying Warunyupha had been instrumental in having all the *Epigraphic and Historical Studies* published in one volume by the Historical Society in 1992. It was a voluminous publication of 821 pages. The Appendix, pages 806 to 821, contains Dr. Prasert’s parting shots on the Ram Khamhaeng Controversy. I was assigned to look after him that day, but Dr. Prasert waved me away. He helped himself to two slices of Swiss roll and sat contentedly with the guest speakers, former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun (Honorary Member, elected 1992) and Dr. Chetana Nagavajara (Honorary Member, elected 2004).

Dr. Prasert never wrote a proper book on Sukhothai or early Thai history. He quipped that Dr. Winai Pongsripian can write it when he is gone. It is well known that he regarded Dr. Winai as his academic heir. I think the pleasantry has a deeper meaning. He probably considered himself the presenter of raw material for historians. His meticulous publications of primary sources, inscribed or written, his calculation of exact dates of past events, are supremely valuable. Students of Thai history will surely be indebted to him for a long time to come.

Tej Bunnag