

M.R. Rujaya Abhakorn (1944–2022)



Mom Rajawongse (M.R.) Rujaya Abhakorn had been associated with the Siam Society Under Royal Patronage for a long period before becoming a council member. He served as the 2nd Vice President of the Siam Society Council and as Honorary Librarian of the Society from 2014 to 2020. M.R. Rujaya's expertise in library work and his valuable advice contributed greatly to the progress of the Siam Society. As an articulate advocate for cultural and documentary heritage of Southeast Asia, one of the most devoted scholars in the field of Southeast Asian history has been lost.

To benefit from his expertise and work on the Provincial University Library Network (PULINET), the Siam Society often sought his advice. In 2013, when he was on the committee of the UNESCO Memory of the World Pacific Programme, he supported the nomination of the Society's Council Minutes, dating between 1904–2004, for inscription on the International Register as a Memory of the World Heritage.

M.R. Rujaya was passionate about history, his keen interest leading him to receive a Colombo Scholarship to study history at the Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand. He graduated with two bachelor's degrees in history and political science and history in 1969 and 1970 respectively. He returned to Thailand to begin his career as a lecturer in the Department of History at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Thammasat University before asking for a transfer in 1973 to the Department of History, Faculty of Humanities, Chiang Mai University, remaining a professor there until his retirement.

One of his legacies at the department was starting a course on Lan Na history, featuring comparative linkage studies with the histories of neighbouring countries, such as China, Myanmar and Laos.

While at Chiang Mai University, M.R. Rujaya furthered his studies in history, obtaining a MA and then a PhD in Southeast Asian Studies from Cornell University in 1984. His thesis on “Ratburi, an Inner Province: Local Government and Central Politics in Siam, 1862–1892” was based on extensive reading of records in the National Archives and provided a detailed picture of the traditional system of local administration, as well as the transformation by the Firth Reign reforms. It also mapped the influence of the Bang Chang and Bunnag families in this region of Siam.

His background in Southeast Asian studies inspired him to become involved in the establishment of the Center for the Promotion of Arts and Culture at Chiang Mai University that aimed to maintain, nurture, preserve, collect, research and study the art and culture of Lan Na. He was the first Director of the Center in 1985. He conducted considerable research, worked with locals, and deepened his interest in documentary heritage. He collaborated with Harald Hundius, a German guest lecturer and research adviser at the university, in establishing a Master’s Degree programme in Lan Na Language and Literature in the Thai Department of Chiang Mai University. They also implemented the Preservation of Northern Thai Manuscripts Project (PNTMP) under the Center for the Promotion of Arts and Culture. The project took place between 1987 and 1991, during which M.R. Rujaya was the Project Leader, inspiring similar projects in Laos and Myanmar. After he became the Director of Chiang Mai University Library in 1989, old manuscripts became one of the university’s main collections which were digitized and converted into microfilm. He was instrumental in promoting this collection, ensuring that it should be translated for people to understand these historic documents.

Under his directorship, and as Chairman of the Provincial University Library Network (PULINET), Chiang Mai University Library sustained a vibrant library network offering lifelong learning and knowledge for the wider community.

With holistic experience in teaching, researching and collecting historical evidence, mainly in documentary heritage, M.R. Rujaya expanded his work from a national level to a wider regional and international sphere. As the Deputy Director of the Secretariat of the SEAMEO (Southeast Asia Ministers of Education Organization) and later the Director of SEAMEO Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts (SEAMEO SPAFA) in the final years of his life, he was influential in efforts to help regional government officials, educators, educational institutions, cultural and arts practitioners, and enthusiasts acquire a new understanding of the complexities of Southeast Asia through diverse projects: notably, these included the flagship programmes that he conceived on archaeology, fine arts, conservation, and disaster risk reduction.

Many friends, students, and interlocutors will remember M.R. Rujaya’s characteristic wry sense of humor and ability to invigorate interactions that generated diverse perspectives and insights. We also gained much from the wisdom of this cultural heritage enthusiast, who travelled extensively around the world.

Somlak Charoenpot