

AN INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON HRH PRINCE DAMRONG RAJANUBHAB
& PROF. GEORGE CŒDÈS (15 MAY 2024, PARIS)

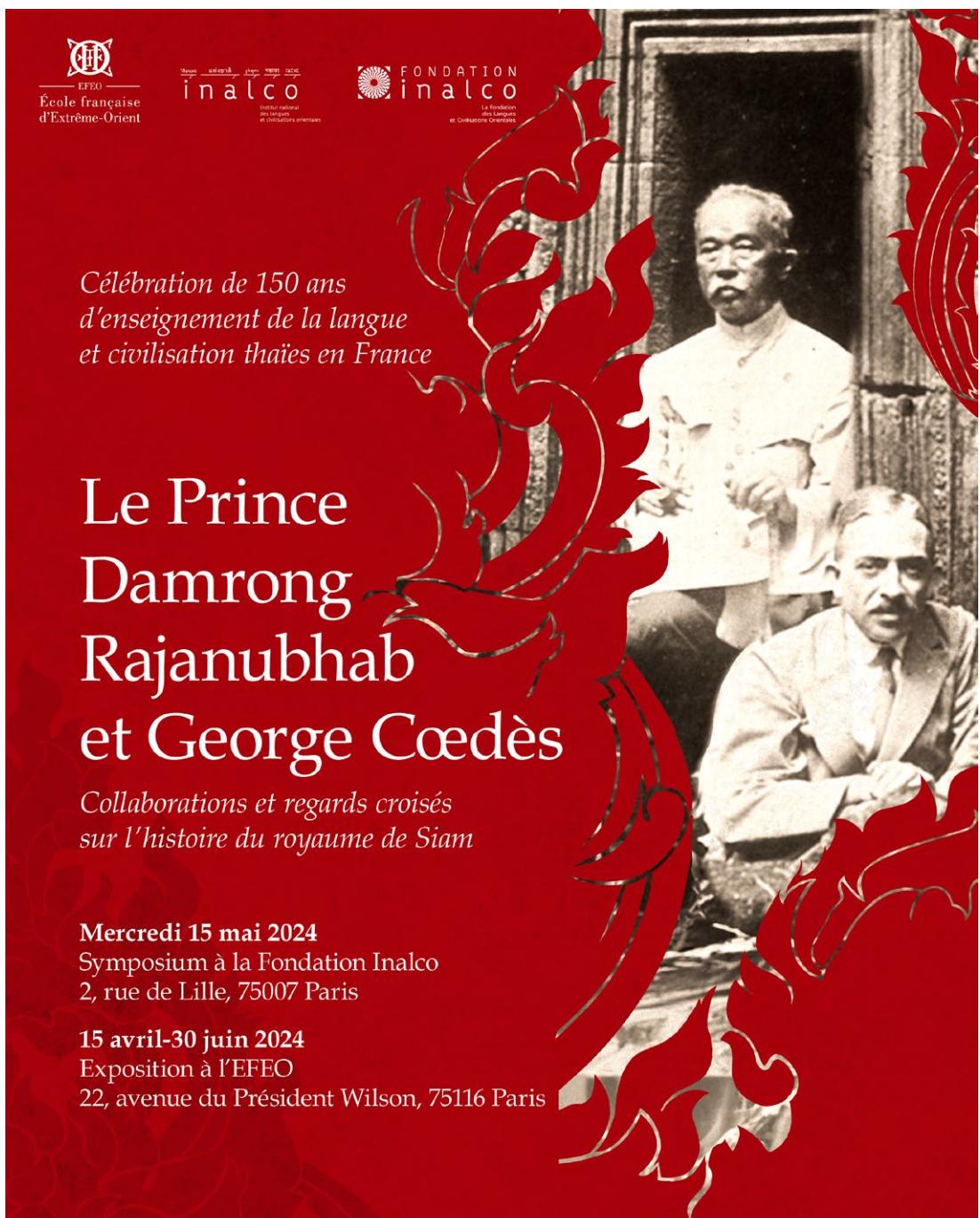


FIGURE 1: Poster of the Symposium © Missions Étrangères de Paris

To celebrate 150 years of teaching Siamese language and civilization in France, the INALCO Foundation and the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) organized a symposium on 15 May 2024 dedicated to two eminent figures in Siamese (Thai) historical studies: Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and George Coedès. The international symposium, attended by researchers and dignitaries from France, Thailand, and the USA, was held at the historic headquarters of the Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales (INALCO) at 2, rue de Lille, in the 7th arrondissement of Paris [FIGURE 1].¹ A parallel photographic exhibition on the same theme was held at the EFEO, avenue du Président Wilson (16th arrondissement). Both events were graced by the presence of HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn.

The main organizers of the event were Philippe Advani and Arnaud Gennevoix for the INALCO Foundation, Marie-Sybille de Vienne and Émilie Testard for INALCO, and Gregory Kourilsky for the EFEO. The exhibition was curated by Isabelle Poujol (EFEO) with the assistance of Clémence Le Meur and Thissana Weerakietsoontorn. The initiative was supported by the Royal Thai Embassy in France and the French Embassy in Thailand, represented respectively by Their Excellencies Sarun Charoensuwan and Jean-Claude Poimbœuf, as well as the French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs.

The initial writing of Thai history is the fruit of both Thai and European

scholarly traditions. Two eminent figures whose legacies continue to resonate in historical studies devoted to Siam and the Thai world are Prince Damrong Rajanubhab (1862–1943) and George Coedès (1886–1969). Prince Damrong, a son of King Mongkut (r. 1851–1868), played a crucial role in modernizing the Siamese administration during the reign of his brother, King Chulalongkorn (1868–1910). Primarily a statesman, Prince Damrong inspired both Siamese and foreign historians, founding an historical school that remains influential today.

George Coedès made significant contributions to the history of early Southeast Asia, particularly through his expertise in the epigraphy of ancient Cambodia, Siam, and other cultural areas in the region. He served as the director of the EFEO from 1929 to 1946. Before this, while still a “pensionnaire” (i.e., temporary member) of the EFEO in Cambodia, Prince Damrong invited him to Bangkok to work as chief librarian at the Vajirañāṇa Library, replacing the German Indianist Oskar Frankfurter, who had to leave Siam due to the Kingdom entering the World War conflict and declaring war on Germany and Austria-Hungary in mid-1917.² Coedès began his new role in January 1918, taking leave from the EFEO to become an official employee of the Siamese crown.

Coedès worked alongside Prince Damrong for over a decade—first in the library and later in the Archeological Department (which was to become an integral part of the Fine Arts

¹ The symposium can be watched in full at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5AeREW73E&list=PL_Ho10cdZ29mY6pMi0_3uu71KfU13DpTH&index=4.

² On which, see the article by Volker Grabowsky, published in JSS, Vol. 112, Part 1, June 2024: <https://doi.org/10.69486/112.1.2024.2>.



FIGURE 2: Inaugural Speech by HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn
 © Anaëlle Raguet

Department)—until 1929, when he was appointed Director of the EFEO, then headquartered in Hanoi. Their collaboration resulted in numerous writings and scientific works that advanced historical knowledge about Siam and neighboring countries. Additionally, their partnership introduced new approaches and perspectives that contributed to the emergence of the historical discipline in its modern form in the region.

This symposium, marking the 150th anniversary of Thai studies in France, celebrated the extraordinary careers of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and George Cœdès, while highlighting their enduring intellectual and scientific legacies. It also sought to explore the origins of Thai history within a contemporary framework focused on

national narratives. The event brought together specialists in Thai and pre-Thai history, alongside descendants of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab—namely, MR Damrongdej Diskul and ML Panadda Diskul—and the grandson of George Cœdès, Mr Bernard Cros.

The symposium began with an inaugural speech in French by HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn [FIGURE 2]. Mr Philippe Advani, President of the INALCO Foundation, then introduced the keynote speakers. Jean-François Huchet, President of INALCO, and Nicolas Fiévé, Director of the EFEO, who delivered speeches underscoring the longstanding bonds between their institutions and Thailand. Following them, ML Panadda Diskul, a senator in the Royal Thai Parliament and great-grandson of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab,



FIGURE 3: Group photo of symposium participants with HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn © Anaëlle Raguet

delivered a poignant presentation honoring the memory of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab. He personally recognized Her Royal Highness for her efforts in preserving Thai culture and paid tribute to his grandfather, Prince Damrong. Admiral Alain Coldefy, President of the Société des Membres de la Légion d'Honneur in Paris, highlighted the institution's role in French-Thai relations, noting that Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, George Cœdès, and HRH Princess Sirindhorn had all been decorated as "legionnaires".

In her address, Marie-Sybille de Vienne, Professor Emeritus at INALCO and member of the Académie des Sciences d'outre-mer, emphasized the importance of preserving historical memory and heritage, cautioning against the temptation to forget great historical figures or demote statues of the past. HE Dr Tej Bunnag, Secretary General of the International Commit-

tee of the Red Cross in Thailand, closed the keynote speeches with a discussion, also in French, on the role of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab in modernizing the Siamese state.

After these introductory speeches, HRH Princess Sirindhorn departed from INALCO after taking photographs with event organizers and students from INALCO's Thai section in front of the statue of Antoine-Isaac, Baron Sylvestre de Sacy (1758–1838), a French linguist and philosopher who made a powerful contribution to the progress of Oriental studies in France [FIGURE 3].

Following a visit to the Église Saint-Sulpice in Paris's 6th arrondissement, Her Royal Highness and her delegation proceeded to 22 Avenue du Président Wilson, the Parisian headquarters of the EFEO, to attend the exhibition dedicated to Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and George Cœdès. This exhibition included a series of 26 photographs



FIGURE 4: Prince Damrong Rajanubhab with his wife and daughters (back row), George Cœdès with his wife and daughters (front row), at Varadis Palace in Bangkok, 1928 © Bernard Cros

showcasing the two scholars conducting field research, participating in rituals and ceremonies, accompanying official delegations, and posing with their families [FIGURE 4]. Alongside these photographs, various personal belongings of George Cœdès and historical documents related to both scholars were on display, including the Frenchman's letter of appointment as curator of the Vajirañāna Library, signed by the Siamese Prince.

After a welcoming speech by Nicolas Fiévé, Director of the EFEO, Her Royal Highness had the opportunity to explore a selection of ancient works, archival documents, and Siamese manuscripts housed in the Parisian EFEO library. The

visit concluded with the Princess signing the EFEO's guest book and receiving several publications from the institution as gifts. Her Royal Highness also donated books to the EFEO library.

Meanwhile, the symposium continued at INALCO with three academic sessions. The first was inaugurated by Mr Bernard Cros (Académie du Var). Drawing extensively from family archives, Mr Cros retraced the collaborative years between his grandfather and Prince Damrong. Gregory Kourilsky (EFEO, Bangkok) and Thissana Weerakietsoontorn (Ramkhamhaeng University) then delivered a joint presentation on the transition from historiography to history and the intellectual and methodological

exchanges between Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and George Cœdès. Christophe Pottier (EFEO, Chiang Mai) concluded the morning session with a discussion on the archeological collections of Thailand's National Museum and Cœdès's significant contributions to their study and publications.

The opening session in the afternoon delved into the history of art with two insightful presentations. The first, by Nicolas Revire (The Art Institute of Chicago) focused on the pioneering work of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and George Cœdès during the mid-1920s, establishing the field of Dvāravatī studies. The second presentation, by Disapong Netlomwong (The Fine Arts Department, Bangkok), explored the development of Thailand's National Museum under the guidance of these two scholars.

The final session took a literary turn. Chris Baker from the Siam Society in Bangkok presented and analyzed, via prerecorded video, Damrong Rajanubhab's 1924 journey to Angkor, which inspired his diary book *Nirat Nakhon Wat* (นิรاثนக្រវត្ត), first published in 1925, translated into English and republished this year for the occasion.³ Émilie Testard from INALCO then provided an in-depth analysis of Jean Burnay's seminal work, *La Chrestomathie siamoise* (1938), highlighting its foundation in the writings of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and George Cœdès.

The symposium concluded with a speech by Philippe Advani, emphasizing

the crucial role of scientific exchanges between Thailand and France in fostering both knowledge development and diplomatic relations. Advani announced plans for an ambitious bilateral program over the next two years, commemorating the 340th anniversary of the first contact between Siam and France and the 170th anniversary of diplomatic relations. This initiative aims to enhance Thai studies in France through academic exchanges, scientific events, and public initiatives in areas such as the international teaching of Thai language and civilization, historical and archeological research, and expert exchanges in heritage fields such as art history, museography, conservation, preservation, and restoration.

A comparable symposium, organized by counterparts in the Thai Fine Arts Department, is tentatively scheduled to take place in Bangkok in the near future.

CREDITS & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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³ *Journey to Angkor by HRH Prince Damrong Rajanubhab*, translated by Bruce Evans, edited by Peter Skilling & Chris Baker, Bangkok: River Books, 2024.

APPENDIX: SYMPOSIUM SCHEDULE

Wednesday 15 May 2024

9h15 Welcoming Addresses

Philippe Advani, Fondation INALCO, Paris
HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, Bangkok, Kingdom of Thailand
Jean-François Huchet, INALCO, Paris
Nicolas Fiévé, EFEO, Paris
Admiral Alain Coldefy, Société des Membres de la Légion d'honneur, Paris
Marie-Sybille de Vienne, INALCO, Paris

9h55 First Session: Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and George Cœdès

ML Panadda Diskul, Varadis Palace Museum Foundation, Bangkok:
“Honoring the Memory of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab”

HE Tej Bunnag, Thai Red Cross, Bangkok:
“The Role of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab in the Modernization of the Siamese State”

10h30 Coffee Break, Photos and Gifts Presentation

10h45 Second Session: Thailand's History in the Making

Bernard Cros, Académie du Var, Toulon:
“George Cœdès at Prince Damrong's Side: A Close Collaboration in the Service of Siamese History”

Gregory Kourilsky, EFEO Bangkok
& Thissana Weerakietsoontorn, Ramkhamhaeng University, Bangkok:
“From Historiography to History: Intellectual Exchanges between Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and George Cœdès”

Christophe Pottier, EFEO Chiang Mai:
“About the Archeological Collections in the National Museum of Thailand”

12h15 Lunch Break

14h00 Third Session: Uncovering Thailand's History

Nicolas Revire, The Art Institute of Chicago:

“Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and George Cœdès, Fathers of Dvāravatī Studies”

Disapong Netlomwong, FAD, Bangkok:

“Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and George Cœdès and the Development of the National Museum of Thailand”

15h15 Coffee Break

15h30 Fourth Session: Siam and France

Chris Baker, Siam Society, Bangkok (recorded video):

“Prince Damrong Rajanubhab at Angkor in 1924: Tourist, Historian, Diplomat, Raconteur”

Émilie Testard, INALCO, Paris:

“*La Chrestomathie siamoise* by Jean Burnay: From French Orientalism on Siam to Franco-Thai studies”

17h00 Closing Remarks & Cocktail