

## NATURE FOR THE NATION? RETHINKING THE NATIONALIST RUPTURE IN SIAMESE FORESTRY HISTORY

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**ABSTRACT**—This article revisits the history of Siam’s Royal Forest Department (RFD) in the early 20th century, focusing on two key policies: replacing British staff with young Siamese officers and reserving concessions for the state logging industry and local firms. While official accounts frame these as nationalist reforms under King Vajiravudh (Rama VI), this study argues for continuity with earlier regimes and highlights the limited impact of nationalism. By situating Siam within the global teak trade, this article shows how the RFD reinforced Siam’s role as a raw material supplier, resembling a colonial economy rather than resisting it.

**KEYWORDS:** Anglo–Siamese Relations; Colonial Economy; Nationalism; Royal Forest Department (RFD); Siamese Forestry; Teak Trade

### Nationalism as Rupture?

The history of forestry in Siam, as Thailand was termed until 1939, was intertwined with colonialism from the outset. In 1896, the Siamese government established the Royal Forest Department (กรมป่าไม้; hereafter RFD)—the first specialized institution to manage forest resources.<sup>2</sup> Early Thai-language scholarship usually frames the RFD and the introduction of modern forestry as part of Siam’s modernization campaigns as the country struggled to save itself from European colonial aggression (Wanchalee 2520; Chamaichome 2521; Salairat 2528). However, more recent scholarship has countered that the rise of the RFD should be understood as a

colonial endeavor (Barton & Bennett 2010; Araya 2564; Tinakrit 2022). For Siamese elites in Bangkok, the increasing number of forest-related disputes between Lan Na lords and British subjects provided Siam with excellent excuses to strengthen its control over the northern provinces. Starting from the mid-19th century, Siam gradually extended its political presence in Lan Na and gained an increasing share of profit from the lucrative timber trade.<sup>3</sup> By the 1890s, Lan Na had been turned into a Siamese administrative unit, known as Monthon Phayap (มณฑลพายัพ), with

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<sup>2</sup> See National Archives of Thailand [hereafter NAT], ร.5 ม.16/7 ความเห็นมิสเดอสลัดเรื่องจะตั้งกรมป่าไม้ที่เมืองนครเชียงใหม่ [Mr Slade’s Opinion on the Establishment of the Forest Department in Chiang Mai].

<sup>3</sup> Although Lan Na became a Siamese tributary in the late 18th century, it remained largely autonomous and Bangkok rarely intervened in its affairs. British pressure over disputes with Lan Na rulers led to the Chiang Mai Treaties of 1874 and 1883. Before then, Siamese involvement was *ad hoc*, with no officials stationed locally (Barton & Bennett 2010: 70).

Siamese commissioners sent from Bangkok to oversee state affairs in the North (Easum 2023).<sup>4</sup> Seen in this light, this article proposes that the RFD should be regarded as a colonial institution to facilitate Siam's exploitation of Lan Na's rich forest resources (Tinakrit 2022).

Despite its official status as a department within the Siamese bureaucracy, the RFD during the early years was dominated by British foresters, simultaneously serving the purposes of both Siam and the British Empire. On the one hand, the RFD was a mechanism for Siamese elites to displace Lan Na ruling elites in the realm of forest management. Having managed to convince Lan Na lords to give up the ownership of their forests in exchange for a promise of a steadier income from timber taxes, the RFD helped Siam centralize forest administration in the North, which also meant opportunities to generate state revenues for Bangkok. On the other hand, the RFD was expected to protect British interests in the Siamese teak trade. By lending British forest officers to help run the new department, the British Foreign Office hoped to assert a degree of influence over the direction of Siam's forest administration and facilitate British monopolization of the teak trade against the French (Barton & Bennett 2010: 75). Therefore, instead of a Siam-versus-Europe colonial relation, the

birth of the Forest Department gave rise to a form of colonial collaboration between the British Empire and the Siamese government at the expense of Lan Na ruling elites (Araya 2564; Easum 2023).

Nevertheless, the Anglo-Siamese collaboration was not permanent. By the turn of the 20th century, Siamese ruling elites in Bangkok became worried that the British had too much power. Unlike other new departments created since 1892, where Siamese officers started to replace foreign officers, the Forestry Department continued to be dominated by non-Siamese officers. Prince Phenphatthanaphong (พระเจ้าลูกยาเธอ พระองค์เจ้าเพ็ญพัฒนพงษ์; 1882–1909) raised this concern in 1903 when he inspected forest administration in northern Siam and heard of complaints that British officers tended to work in favor of their fellow Britons. The Prince suggested a reorganization of the administrative hierarchy, proposing that the management of forest concessions in the northern forests be supervised by the Siamese Commissioner of Monthon Phayap (ข้าหลวงใหญ่ประจำมณฑลพายัพ).<sup>5</sup> Despite the Prince's attempt, the British continued to dominate the RFD until the 1920s. As **TABLE 1** shows, in the period from 1904–1923 11 foreign foresters continued to enjoy relatively the same power as the Siamese in managerial

<sup>4</sup> Since 1874 and before the establishment of Monthon Phayap, the Siamese government used a few other names to refer the areas in Lan Na that were put under the responsibility of Siamese commissioners sent from Bangkok. Former names include Hua Mueang Lao Chiang (หัวเมืองลาวเฉียง), Monthon Lao Chiang (มณฑลลาวเฉียง), and Monthon Tawantok Chiang Nuea (มณฑลตวันตกเฉียงเหนือ).

<sup>5</sup> This proposal contrasted with Herbert Slade's earlier efforts to shield the RFD from "non-expert" officers, such as regional civil administrators. He repeatedly urged the Siamese government to clarify the RFD's authority versus the Regional Administrative Office, a demarcation only achieved in 1901. See NAT, ร.5 ม.16/10, รายงานพระองค์เจ้าเพ็ญ เสด็จตรวจการป่าไม้ [Prince Phen's Report on the Observation of Forest Works]; also Tinakrit 2022: 184–190.

**TABLE 1: Number of British and Siamese Officials in the Royal Forest Department**

Forest Conservator in charge	British Officials	Siamese Officials
H.A. Slade (1895–1901)	16	9
W.F.L. Tottenham (1901–1904)	14	1
W.F. Lloyd (1904–1923)	11	7

**SOURCE: Adapted from Salairat 2528: 53**

positions (Ministry of Agriculture 2511: 31–32).

More concrete solutions emerged after King Vajiravudh ascended to the Siamese throne in 1910. To curb foreign influence, the Siamese government implemented two important changes. First, foreign officers started to be replaced by the Siamese. Second, the RFD had to limit the proportion of foreign-owned concessions and promote more concessions by the government and Siamese private companies. Some scholars, such as Salairat Dolarom (2528: 111–126), frame these changes as the effects of nationalist policies during the reign of King Vajiravudh (Rama VI; 1910–1925).<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, the reign of King Vajiravudh seems to institute a rupture; Anglo–Siamese collaboration of the previous reign gradually gave way to Siamese supremacy.

Yet, an overt emphasis on nationalist transformation may obscure the nuances and dynamics of Anglo–Siamese

relations during the early 20th century. Amnuayvit Thitibordin (2016: 89–90) argues that what seems to be the relative success of the Siamese government to decrease British influence may well be the result of the British Foreign Office’s own decision to stop interfering in Siam’s forest affairs. Contrarily, Gregory Barton & Brett Bennett (2021) explain it as a consequence of the decolonization of Britain’s informal empire in Siam.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, it is also worth revisiting Siam’s forest–nation relation through post-developmental frameworks—such as the division between Global North and Global South—to unveil the institutionalized power hierarchy usually ignored in modernization discourse (Litonjua 2012). Having considered these aspects, this article argues that Siamese forestry history cannot be explained simply as a nationalist triumph taking over the RFD and teak concessions. The plan to replace British officers with Siamese ones had already been set in motion under King Chulalongkorn (Rama V; r. 1868–1910), while nationalist accounts overlook cases where British officers sided with

<sup>6</sup> Rama VI’s reign is often discussed as a surge of royal nationalism, distinguishing it from Chulalongkorn’s modernization. Walter Vella hailed Vajiravudh as “the founder of modern nationalism in his country” (1978), while Benedict Anderson (2006) framed his policies—propaganda, compulsory education, historical revision, and youth projects—as “official nationalism”, a strategy by dominant groups to assert inclusion in an emerging national community.

<sup>7</sup> Barton & Bennett see the 1930s as a turning point, but Siam’s RFD (1896) shows “decolonization” was already planned, highlighting Siamese agency in wartime timber nationalization.

the Siamese government, or when that government itself sought to retain them. Re-evaluating nationalist forest management within the context of global teak trade and diplomacy, this article shows that increased concessions to Siamese firms and promotion of local officers did not amount to real control of natural resources. Rather, Siam normalized its subordinate role as a raw material supplier to European industries, reinforcing an ambiguous colonial identity (Harrison & Jackson 2010).

### From British to Siamese Leadership

Before 1896, forest administration was not a specialized area of state administration. The various tasks that constitute *kan pamai* (การป่าไม้), “forestry” today, were assigned to bureaucrats from different departments and ministries. These bureaucrats handled paperwork, collected taxes, oversaw legal disputes about teak trade, and took care of other forest matters. Yet, none of them had much experience or had ever received specific training in forest management, let alone scientific forestry. When the Siamese government, inspired by the examples in British India and British Burma decided to create a forest department, no Siamese understood the job or knew how to run the new department.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the government reached out to the British government, who agreed to

lend forest officers from British Burma to help Siam establish the RFD (Barton & Bennett 2010: 74). For almost three decades, the RFD was put under the leadership of three British forest officers, namely: (1) Herbert A. Slade (1895–1901); (2) W.F.L. Tottenham (1901–1904); and (3) W.F. Lloyd (1904–1923). Eventually, in 1924, Phraya Daruphanphithak (พระยาตรุพันธ์พิทักษ์), also known as Sanit Pukkaman (สนิท พุกกะมาน; hereafter Phraya Daruphan) [FIGURE 1], became the first Siamese director of the RFD, where he served until his retirement in 1934.

This transition was one of the key moments in the official historical narrative produced by the RFD. One common explanation for this transition is that, prior to 1924, no Siamese person had “sufficient knowledge and experience” in forestry to lead the new department. According to *History of the Forest Department*, published to commemorate the cremation of Phraya Daruphan in 1968:

This year [1924] marks a historic year for the Forest Department: since its establishment, the government relied on foreigners for 29 years to manage forest affairs. During that period, the Department lacked Thai officers with sufficient knowledge and experience to manage forestry as effectively as foreigners, most of whom were experts. The government now considered it no longer necessary [to hire many foreigners] because those [Thai students] who had received royal

<sup>8</sup> In 1892, the Siamese government sent Commissioner Nai Son to survey Lan Na’s forests and study British Burma and India. He concluded that Siam needed specialists to manage forest administration. See NAT ร.5 ม.16/11, พระยาสุรศักดิ์สงครามเรื่องข้าหลวงไปตรวจป่าไม้เมืองตากและเมืองพม่าแดนอังกฤษและเลยไปอินเดียต่อไป [Phraya Surasak, Report on Sending a Commissioner to Survey the Forests in Tak, Burma, and India (1893)].



**FIGURE 1: Phraya Daruphan. Public Domain**

scholarships since 1900 had completed studies in forestry in England, India, and Burma. This followed the policy to enhance Thai competency so that forest administration could be returned to and managed by Thai officers, as suggested by HRH Prince Damrong Rajanubhab. [Those students] returned to serve in the Forest Department for 25 years. Therefore, Thai officers were deemed to have

the knowledge, ability, and experience to manage forestry independently, making it no longer necessary to hire foreigners as directors of the department (Ministry of Agriculture 2511: 32–33).<sup>9</sup>

The description above highlights a common, oft-repeated explanation about why foreigners dominated the

<sup>9</sup> Here and hereafter, all translations from Thai sources are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

Forest Department for so long: Thais were not yet ready (Chamaichome 2521: 113–114). On the one hand, this explanation takes for granted the idea that forestry requires an expertise for which Westerners were more familiar, hence, Siam needed to depend on foreign employees. On the other hand, the implication is that forestry is a subject that can be learned and mastered. Given time and practice, Thais can become as capable as their foreign counterparts.

The discourse emphasizing the lack of forestry knowledge as well as the unreadiness of Thais appears several times in Phraya Daruphan's cremation volume. For example, to explain Siam in 1896, the book notes: "Nobody had expertise in forestry, so it was necessary to hire experienced foreigners as staff and trainers. At the same time, [the government] should send young men to study forestry and eventually return forest administration to Thai hands when appropriate" (Ministry of Agriculture 2511: 7–8). Similarly, when the government hired W.F. Lloyd as the third director of the RFD in 1904, the *History of the Forest Department* explains, "(F)ew Thai officers in the RFD understand forestry and they still do not have enough experience" (Ibid.: 17). Though admitting that Siam had to rely on some forms of foreign expertise, King Chulalongkorn questioned the domination of foreigners: why the RFD could not replace foreign staff with Siamese counterparts just as the provincial Gendarmerie had.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the attempt to have more Siamese officers

<sup>10</sup> See King Chulalongkorn to Damrong Rajanubhab (2 December 1901). In NAT, ร.5 ม.16/13, จัดการกรมป่าไม้ [On Organizing the Forest Department (1901–1909)].

serve in high-rank positions in the RFD remained unsuccessful until the 1920s.

The appointment of Phraya Daruphan as the first Siamese RFD director suggests that the government deemed itself ready to take over forestry affairs. Prior to this position, Phraya Daruphan had served as the Conservator of the Northern Circle, which was equal to regional director.<sup>11</sup> In support of this appointment, Chaophraya Phonthep (เจ้าพระยาพลเทพ; Minister of Agriculture, in office 1920–1930) wrote that Phraya Daruphan was chosen for his "disposition as well as his demeanor and resourcefulness" and thus was considered "more suitable than others, and he was widely respected not only by Siamese and foreign bureaucrats but also by foreign timber companies".<sup>12</sup> Besides the emphasis on the previous unreadiness, the story of Phraya Daruphan's rise as the first Siamese to run the RFD is usually framed as a result of the surge of royal nationalism which characterized the reign of King Vajiravudh. The emphasis on the "Thainess" of Phraya Daruphan is also reproduced in later generations of Thai forest officers. For example, Chalerm Siriwan (2511), Director of the Forest Industry Organization (ผู้อำนวยการองค์การอุตสาหกรรมป่าไม้), recounted how Phraya Daruphan had an "authentically Thai"

<sup>11</sup> In 1905, the RFD created three new positions to facilitate regional forest administration. Consequently, the kingdom's forests were divided into three circles (forest regions) under three Circle Conservators: Phraya Daruphanphitak (North), Phraya Wanphruekphichan (พระยารีนพฤกษ์พิจารณ์; East and Northeast), and Phraya Phanaphalarak (พระยาพนพลารักษ์; South).

<sup>12</sup> See NAT, ร.6 กษ.3/21, ตั้งพระยาครุพันธ์พิทักษ์เป็นอธิบดีกรมป่าไม้ [Phaya Daruphanphitak as Director of the Forest Department (1924)].

way of governance, “treating his subordinates as if they were family members”. He was regarded as honest and devoted to the nation, religion, and king, committed to a professional ethos, and deeply concerned about the kingdom’s forests. He also displayed strong nationalist tendencies, resisted foreign influence, and was widely respected by foreign timber companies, most of which were British.

While associating this transition with the surge in royal nationalism during King Vajiravudh’s reign is convenient, the rise of Siamese foresters should rather be understood as a product of a policy that had already taken shape during the previous reign. Herbert Slade stated in his first report to the Siamese government that he did not wish to have so many Europeans in the RFD, hoping instead that one day the RFD would be completely officed by locals. Indeed, Slade did not naively believe that every Siamese officer could effectively serve the RFD, claiming that bestowing the power and responsibility to an inexperienced, non-professional officer would be unfair to the officer and to his subordinates. Thus, despite his discouragement of foreign employees, Slade posited that it was still necessary at this early stage to employ a small number of experienced foreign officers, under whom the Siamese subordinates could be trained in new forest practices. Moreover, he encouraged that the government annually send 2–3 young men to study forestry in Britain or India so that they would become future RFD directors.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> See NAT, ร.5 ม.16/9, มิสเตอร์สเลดขึ้นไปตรวจป่าไม้ได้กลับถึงกรุงเทพฯ แล้ว แลได้ทำรายงานตามความเห็นที่จัดการ

Following Slade’s advice, the Siamese government in 1900 sent four students with government scholarships to study forestry at the Imperial Forest College in Dehradun, India. This group consisted of Thongkham Savetsila (ทองคำ เศวตศิลา; later Phraya Wanphruekphichan พระยาวันพฤกษ์พิจารณ์), Wat Vindubramanakul (วาศ วินทุพราหมณกุล; later Phraya Phana phalarak พระยาพนพลารักษ์), Auer Suphamit (เอือ ศุภมิตร; later Phraya Sombatborihan พระยาสมบัติบริหาร), and Lop Niromruerk (ลพ นิยมฤกษ์; later Khun Wanakhanprawet ขุนวานขันธ์ประเวศ). Among them, Thongkham and Wat managed to rise to managerial rank, serving as Conservator of the Eastern and Northeastern Circle and Conservator of the Southern Circle, respectively. However, none of them eventually became Director of the RFD. The position went to Sanit Pukkaman (later Phraya Daruphan), who received a scholarship to study agriculture in Britain in 1897. Sanit first enrolled in an agricultural program at Wellingore Hall College, Lincolnshire, and then pursued his study in forestry at the Royal Indian Engineering College, Cooper’s Hill. Having finished his training, he returned to Siam to work for the RFD in 1906, the same year as the first generation of forestry students from Dehradun.

There had been signs that Phraya Daruphan would become the first director of the RFD since the early 1900s. In his eulogy for the latter, Phraya Phananuchon (พระยาพนานุจร 2511) claimed that his career path in forestry was under the patronage of Prince

ต่อไปมาเสนอด้วย [Mr Slade: Report on Forest Inspections and Policy Recommendations upon Returning to Bangkok].

Phenphatthanaphong. The prince encouraged Phraya Daruphan, after completing his agricultural studies, to study forestry in order to prepare for taking over the role of Director of the Forest Department from British employees. When Prince Phenphatthanaphong returned to Siam and began working in the Ministry of Agriculture, he inquired about Phraya Daruphan and asked that the Ministry of Interior consider giving him the rank he deserved.<sup>14</sup> In addition, when Lloyd (the third director) took a vacation abroad, Phraya Daruphan was appointed Acting Director even though there were several available English officers who had worked for the RFD for a long time. This seemingly transgressive appointment suggests the extent to which some Siamese elites valued and trusted Phraya Daruphan. Placed within the historical trajectory, the rise of Phraya Daruphan

was the result of Slade's recommendation since the 1890s, even though it took the Siamese government almost three decades to realize this goal.

### **Bias as Necessity**

The late transition of the directorship to the Siamese suggests the continuity of Siam's forestry policy since the establishment of the RFD in 1896. It appears that the plan had always been to have a forest department run by Siamese staff and for the benefit of the Siamese nation. However, at this early stage, most of the profits usually went to the British; by the early 1900s, British timber companies dominated the teak industry in Siam. As shown in **TABLE 2**, British companies had acquired the largest portion of forest concessions in Siam by 1902.

**TABLE 2: Division of Teak Concessions in 1902**

<b>Concessions Calculated by Nationality</b>	<b>Number of Concessions</b>
British	59
Siamese or Chinese in Siam	22
Danish (East Asiatic Company)	1
Dutch	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>83</b>

**SOURCE: Adapted from Amnuayvit 2016: 208**

<sup>14</sup> According to Phraya Phananuchon (2511), the prince inquired where Sanit was stationed, his salary, and why he had not yet received a rank like Indian graduates who held Luang or Khun titles.

During the early 20th century, the Siamese government tried to actively restrict the British monopoly while increasing the share of government and Siamese companies. In 1909, the RFD proposed a rearrangement of the forest concession system, both to preserve the timber resource and to simplify forest management. The rearrangement included the extension of the lease period from six years to fifteen years and the redistribution of teak forests among the lessees. During a ministerial meeting, when this proposal was discussed, King Vajiravudh expressed his concern that, in the future, no forests would be left for Siamese companies. Though saying that he “lacked sufficient knowledge about the matter and had to trust the minister’s decision”, the King was quite assertive when he stressed that forest administration should be based on fairness [by which he meant working in favor of locals]. Prince Damrong, Minister of Interior, reassured the King that there were still forests in Phitsanulok and Sawankhalok that had not been opened for extraction and were reserved for Siamese. Interestingly, when the King inquired about the foreign staff’s biased treatment, Prince Damrong did not deny the issue. Instead, he simply said that “(H)e was keeping an eye on it and that the bias was a necessity”.<sup>15</sup>

Some of the necessarily biased incidents that Prince Damrong referred to were associated with the preservation

of Anglo–Siamese collaboration against the French, as discussed above. However, during King Vajiravudh’s reign, bias sometimes began to favor Siamese subjects. Besides ensuring forest reserves for future Siamese investment, the King usually tried to support Lan Na lords who wished to join the teak industry [FIGURE 2]. For example, he agreed to give the Mae Chaem Forest concession to Chao Inthawarorot Suriyawong (เจ้าอินทวโรรสสุริยวงษ์) of Chiang Mai as well as lending him 320,000 baht to start the business. In addition, he gave the Mae Ta and Mueang Long Forests to Chao Bunyawat Wongmanit (เจ้าบุญญาภรณ์วงศ์) of Lampang, the Mae Charim Forest to Chao Ratchabut (เจ้าราชบุตร) of Nan, and the Mae Saliap Forest to Chao Ratchaphatikawong (เจ้าราชภาคินวงศ์) (Salairat 2528: 117).

Though repeatedly criticized for their pro-British bias, British foresters usually shared Siam’s concern regarding the increasing influence of British companies. W.F. Lloyd, the third director of the RFD, acknowledged the Siamese government’s plan to preserve some forests for Siamese subjects, stating, “Government wishes these small lessees to have their share in the teak industry, and will endeavor to ensure it for them”.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, to protect Siam’s interests, British officers sometimes confronted their British fellows, especially the Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation (BBTC). For instance, in 1900, Herbert Slade, the first RFD director, reprimanded the BBTC’s directors when they tried to use him to get around the procedures required by Siam’s forest

<sup>15</sup> See “Ministerial Meeting Report” (16 August 1909). In NAT, ๖.6 ม.14/1, ความเห็นจัดการป่าไม้ และแบบร่างสัญญาการทำป่าไม้ขอขอสัก [Suggestions on Forest Management and Draft Agreements for Teak Extraction (1909–1923)].

<sup>16</sup> See W.F. Lloyd, “Proposed Reorganization of Lease” (24 March 1909). In NAT, ๖.6 ม.14/1.



acts. In contrast to the assumption of some Siamese elites, Slade proved himself extremely loyal to Siam—or, more correctly, to Siam's forests—and he did not hesitate to revoke the leases held by his British fellows when deemed necessary (Barton & Bennett 2011: 329).

Whereas the previous reign was rather compromising, King Vajiravudh's government seemed much more willing to confront European nations for Siam's interests. For example, in 1923, the government decided to give the concession of the Mae Ta and Mueang Long Forests to Chao Ratchabut of Lampang instead of to the French East Asiatic Company. In his memo on this issue, Prince Damrong noted that such a decision was Siam's right as "a completely independent nation". The prince also emphasized the necessity of protecting the benefit of the Lan Na lords in Monthon Phayap so that they would acknowledge Siam's authority. According to Prince Damrong, "It must be understood that state administration must consider actions to both the foreign and the countrymen. If it only tries not to upset the foreigners, without paying attention to the countrymen, how will it be possible for the countrymen to maintain their loyalty?"<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, the attempt to increase the Siamese share of the teak forests was not without limitations and the result was far from impressive. As Lloyd reported in 1922, 80% of the forest concessions in Siam were still in the hands of foreign companies while only 14% were controlled by Siamese companies.

<sup>17</sup> See NAT, ๕.5-7 สบ.2.8/2, Memo on the Mae Ta and Mueang Long Forests and the Mae Salit Forest (1909-1926). Cited in Chamaichome 2521: 116-117.

The remaining forests were either worked by the government or given to individuals and firms with little capital in the form of short-term extraction permits. Regarding this problem, Lloyd claimed that the RFD had formerly given many leases to Siamese subjects, but most of these eventually went into the hands of foreign firms. According to Lloyd, "As a rule the Siamese lessee being anxious to realize profits quickly, either sold the working rights at once, or borrowed money under an agreement which enabled the firm eventually to take over the working".<sup>18</sup> By pointing to negative characteristics of Siamese lessees, Lloyd dismissed criticisms and posited that the relatively small proportion of forest holdings by the Siamese in 1922 had nothing to do with pro-British favoritism.

If there was little hope for minor Siamese investment, another option was to have a state-run timber enterprise, in which the government cut, extracted, processed, and sold the timber itself. This idea had already been proposed in 1893 by Prince Narathip Praphanphong (พระเจ้าบรมวงศ์เธอ กรมพระนราธิปประพันธ์พงศ์; 1861-1931), a brother of King Chulalongkorn, but it was rejected by Prince Narisara Nuwattiwong (สมเด็จพระเจ้าบรมวงศ์เธอ เจ้าฟ้ากรมพระยานริศรฯ

<sup>18</sup> See W.F. Lloyd, "Principles of Past and Future Working of Teak Forests" (1922), pp. 2-7. In NAT, ๕.6 ม.14/1. In fact, Lloyd had already made a similar argument in 1909, saying that "The smaller lessees and Chows [Lan Na lords] hardly ever possess sufficient capital and energy. At the same time they expect to be given forests, more for the sake of the immediate profit they hope to derive from it, than with the intention of working hard for a good many years before obtaining any profits from their work". See also W.F. Lloyd, "Proposed Reorganization of Lease" (24 March 1909). In NAT, ๕.6 ม.14/1.

นุวัตติวงศ์; 1863–1947), another brother of King Chulalongkorn.<sup>19</sup> The issue was brought up again in 1903 by Prince Phenphatthanaphong, who had been trying to limit foreign influence over Siam’s forest administration. The prince enthusiastically encouraged the government to extract timber by itself. According to his calculations, the profit the government could make from state logging was more than double what it could make from just the collection of timber taxes and related fees. He also argued that if all the forests in Siam were worked by the government, forest administration would be much simpler and lessen the number of “complicated state affairs”, by which he probably meant disputes with foreign subjects.<sup>20</sup>

Not until 1912 did commercial logging by the Siamese government officially commence. The first extraction was in the Mae Haet Forest in Phrae, described as a large forest with good-quality timber and close to transportation routes. The second site was the Mae Chaem Forest in Chiang Mai, beginning in 1913. In response to the increasing price of teak timber in the market in 1922, the government opened another site in Tak’s Mae Salit-Mae Raka Forest. In 1927 the government transferred the Mae Chaem Forest to the French East Asiatic Company and, instead, started extracting from the Mae Ta-Mueang Long Forest in Lampang. Two of these forests—the Mae Chaem Forest and the Mae Ta-Mueang Long Forest—had

been given to local lords in Monthon Phayap according to the king’s policy during the 1900s. However, those lords failed to make profits from these forests and later got into great debt, thus the government decided to take them over. The government also established timber stations at Pak Nam Pho and Bang Pa In for storing and selling timber from state concessions (Ministry of Agriculture 2511: 22–36).

W.F. Lloyd had encouraged the Siamese government to seriously engage in the teak business since possibly 1909. For example, during the competition for the ownership of the Mae Chaem Forest in 1911, Lloyd compared several options for managing the Mae Chaem Forests and made elaborate calculations of the expenses and profits to be made from each option, concluding that state logging was more profitable.<sup>21</sup> In his 1922 report, he made a similar argument that state logging would “naturally yield the largest revenue” and, thus, should be the preferred mode of timber extraction in Siam. Furthermore, if the government had its timber supply, it would be able to maintain the number of logs in the market. For example, in times of shortage, the government could supply its own timber so as to prevent a drastic rise in timber prices.

In addition to economic benefits, Lloyd noted that state logging also provided educational benefits for young Siamese officers, both ones who just graduated from abroad and those who were newly recruited. With more

<sup>19</sup> See Narisara Nuwattiwong to King Chulalongkorn (25 May 1893). In NAT, ๕.5 ม.16/4, คัดจะจัดการป่าไม้ให้เป็นหลวง แลจัดการป่าไม้ต่างๆ ด้วย [To Nationalize the Forests and Organize Forest Works].

<sup>20</sup> See NAT, ๕.5 ม.16/10, 33–35.

<sup>21</sup> See W.F. Lloyd, “Working of Me Chem Forest” (8 June 1911), pp. 1–9. In NAT, ๕.6 ม.14/2, ความเห็นเรื่องทำป่าไม้แม่แจ่มเป็นของรัฐบาล [Suggestions on the Nationalization of the Mae Chaem Forest].

hands-on knowledge of every step of timber production and transaction, forest officers would understand the actual situation of the timber industry and enact policies to preserve the government's interests. Referring to Burma as an example, Lloyd argued that "without milling and marketing the teak themselves [the government] have not got the full knowledge necessary, and are therefore not in a position to control the firms to the extent they consider necessary". Furthermore, it was a step towards "[dispensing] with foreign aid in the training of her future forest officers", which was in accordance with the government's policy of decreasing foreign influence in the management of Siam's forests.<sup>22</sup>

### **Resituating Siam's Place in Global Politics and Economy**

The change in concession policies and the appointment of the first Siamese director may seem to reflect rising nationalist sentiments in the early 20th century. Yet, rather than focusing only on domestic factors, it is useful to consider the broader international context. Recent scholarship (e.g., Araya 2564; Easum 2023) has highlighted the entanglement of Siam's forestry with colonialism, showing how collaboration between the Siamese and British governments shaped the sector. This was not, however, a partnership of equals. As Barton & Bennett note:

The King of Siam, Chulalongkorn  
(1853–1910), and his growing

centralised, bureaucratic state centred in Bangkok used the threat of British annexation to create and implement extra-territorial treaties and courts, a centralised model of state forestry, and a British dominance of the teak trade that allowed Bangkok to "internally colonise" the independence of northern Siam and stave off French advances (2010: 66).

They describe this arrangement as part of Britain's "informal empire", emphasizing Siam's dependence on British capital and diplomatic support.

The eventual assertion of Siamese control was closely tied to shifts in British foreign policy. After the "Revision of the Anglo-Siamese Commercial Treaties" (1921), the second Chiang Mai treaty was revoked and trade liberalized. Amnuayvit observes that "by the 1920s, both British diplomats and the Foreign Office agreed that it was no longer necessary to aid British companies" (2016: 89). In 1924, the British Legation informed these firms that it would no longer intervene in negotiations with the Siamese government (*ibid.*: 90).

From the outset, British forest officers had staffed the RFD, both assisting its establishment and serving British commercial interests. According to Barton & Bennett, some officers supplied confidential reports to the Foreign Office and British firms, arousing Siamese suspicion (2010: 77). Once diplomatic backing ceased, however, the role of these foreign directors lost significance—paving the way for the appointment of the first Siamese director in 1924.

<sup>22</sup> See W.F. Lloyd, "Principles of Past and Future Working of Teak Forests" (1922), pp. 4–5. In NAT, ๗.6 ๙.14/1.

Meanwhile, the RFD itself was changing. Initially designed to facilitate Anglo–Siamese collaboration in Lan Na, it functioned mainly as a revenue-collecting agency while foreign firms worked the forests. By the 1910s, however, the department began cutting and selling timber directly, shifting from tax collection to commercial activity. In 1921, it was transferred from the Ministry of Interior to the Ministry of Agriculture, signaling its new emphasis on state-led extraction. This move effectively turned the government into a competitor in the teak industry.

Competition with British firms thus became primarily economic rather than political. The monopoly once granted to foreigners now hindered Siam’s ambitions as a trader. The government and the RFD sought to expand state logging and grant more concessions to Siamese companies but lacked the capital to displace foreign firms. The postwar economic downturn further strained resources, leaving the state able to manage only a handful of concessions. By the late 1920s, Siamese actors remained marginal compared to their foreign counterparts and the teak industry still relied heavily on external investment.

The appointment of a Siamese director and the RFD’s reorganization did not fundamentally alter forest governance. Scientific forestry, institutionalized by British officers since 1896, remained the dominant framework. The RFD expanded its corps of professional foresters trained in India and Burma, embedding Siam within a “trans-empire forestry network” (Vanderveest & Peluso 2006a; 2006b). The withdrawal of foreign officers did little to disrupt this system.

In addition, Siam’s teak extraction followed the familiar model of an export-oriented enterprise, often at the expense of local consumers. Once a readily available resource for building houses and temples, teak was increasingly harvested for ships and luxury furniture destined for overseas markets. Local use became marginal: even the 1899 proclamation allowing extraction for charitable works framed domestic consumption as exceptional and requiring state approval,<sup>23</sup> while normalizing exports as the rule. Competition with foreign firms and the rise of Siamese participation in the teak market thus did little to alter the country’s position in the global economy.

Resituating Siam within the global political economy aligns this study with postcolonial scholarship on Siam/Thailand and invites comparison with other nations of the Global South.<sup>24</sup> Though never “formally colonized”, Siam was neither exceptional nor insulated from colonial structures. Its ambiguous position raises the question of who performed the colonizing. Through the institutionalization of scientific forestry and the commercial teak trade, the Siamese state was not merely a victim but an active agent—collaborating with the British, competing with them, and, at times, colonizing its own people and resources.

Moreover, despite nationalist rhetoric, the decision to replace European officers while retaining the institutions they

<sup>23</sup> See NAT, ร.5 ม.16.2/2, อนุญาตตัดไม้สาธารณประโยชน์แก่การกุศล [Allowing Timber Extraction for Charitable Works].

<sup>24</sup> Tamara Loos (2006: 3) notes that Siam’s dual role, at once colonizer and colonized, challenges the adequacy of established colonial categories.

had built reflects the success of Western knowledge in presenting itself as universal rather than culturally specific.<sup>25</sup> By accepting scientific forestry and export-oriented logging as the only “correct” use of forests, the Siamese government perpetuated the colonial legacy of British foresters and entrenched Siam’s role as a raw-material producer within the Global South.

### Rethinking Forestry and Colonial Categories

Increased local participation did not necessarily signify resistance or autonomy.<sup>26</sup> The delayed transition of the RFD directorship and the rise of state logging as the preferred mode of extraction call for a reconsideration of existing narratives of Siamese forestry at the turn of the 20th century. On one side, historians emphasize Siam’s dependence on European expertise; on the other, they highlight nationalism, especially during King Vajiravudh’s reign (1910–1925). Together, these accounts suggest a rupture—a nationalist regime opposing European dominance. Yet many of the changes attributed to

Vajiravudh had been envisioned earlier by both Siamese elites and British officers. The idea of a Siamese-run forest department, for instance, had already been proposed by Slade, who helped lay the foundations of the RFD in the 1890s.<sup>27</sup>

Nationalism, especially when framed in international relations, is often reduced to the nationality of actors. Slade’s defense of Siamese interests and Lloyd’s recommendations in 1909 and 1922, however, show that actors’ nationalities did not determine action. The number of British officers is therefore a poor proxy for British influence; individuals could align more with their employer’s interests than with their compatriots’. To move beyond binary explanations of nationalism, it is essential to examine actors, their affiliations, and their shifting roles in state formation. Euro-American advisers and scientists employed in Asia exemplify this dynamic. They balanced loyalties to employers, national backgrounds, and professional identities, using their expertise as leverage to negotiate power.<sup>28</sup> Expertise thus functioned less as a fixed body of knowledge than as a relational practice shaped by multiple allegiances.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> As Naoki Sakai explains in the case of Japan, “the West is never content with what it is recognized as by others [...]; it continually seeks itself in the midst of interaction with the Other [...]; it would rather be a supplier of recognition than a receiver thereof” (1989: 3).

<sup>26</sup> The same is also true for contemporary forest controversies in Thailand. The recent rise of community forests, while seemingly supporting local rights, creates a condition in which local access to natural resources can only be approved when the local communities agree to protect the forests based on the state’s conservation paradigm (Forsyth & Walker 2008). For comparison, see Arun Agrawal’s study (2005) on the participation of Indian citizens in environmental conservation.

<sup>27</sup> See NAT, ๕.๕ ม.16/9, มิสเตอร์สเลดขึ้นไปตรวจป่าไม่ได้ กลับถึงกรุงเทพฯ แล้ว แลได้ทำรายงานตามความเห็นที่จัดการต่อไปมาเสนอด้วย [Mr Slade’s Report on the Forests and Recommendations for Future Policy].

<sup>28</sup> Slade’s last report for the Siamese government can be seen in this light. He explicitly used his European identity to assert his authority and criticize how the government had been treating him without the respect he claimed to deserve. See NAT ๕.๕ ม.16/3, *The Fifth Annual Report by Herbert Slade, Conservator of Forests* (1901).

<sup>29</sup> As Reiner Grundmann explains, “experts mediate between the production of knowledge and its

Prince Damrong's exchange with Vajiravudh on the necessity of bias also illuminates the character of Anglo-Siamese relations, which diverged from what Taylor Easum terms "collaborative colonialism". Barton & Bennett describe the early 20th century as a period of British monopoly over the teak trade, situating Siam within Britain's "informal empire". Yet their account still assumes a binary colonial relationship, sometimes conflating Siam with the

Lan Na states. Instead of viewing these dynamics solely through British agency, this study suggests that between the late 19th and early 20th centuries Siam actively appropriated colonial models for its own benefit. In doing so, it both supplied European demand and reproduced colonial structures at home. Siam's nationalist forestry, in this sense, was less an assertion of independence than an episode of self-colonization.

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application; they define and interpret situations; and they set priorities for action. Experts are primarily judged by clients, not necessarily by peers (professional or scientific); and they rely on trust by their clients" (2017: 27).

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