

Kra Canal (1824-1910): The Elusive Dream

Terusan Kra (1824-1910): Mimpi yang Tidak Kesampaian

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ABSTRACT

Positioned in the north of the Malay Peninsula, the Isthmus of Kra is the narrowest land mass separating the Andaman Sea from the Gulf of Thailand. Cutting a canal across this isthmus – seldom more than 50 miles across – will reduce almost 1,500 miles of sea route between Europe and East Asia and offer a time saving of almost three days. Yet, what initially appears to be a logical and potentially profitable construction project has proven to be nothing more than an elusive dream. This article looks at the various proposals forwarded for The Kra Canal between 1824 and 1910, during the reigns of King Rama III Phra Nangklao, King Rama IV Mongkut and King Rama V Chulalongkorn. Coincidentally, these three eras represented the period of Siam's modernisation amid creeping European colonisation. These eras also showed Siam's different approaches to foreign relations: Phra Nangklao was an isolationist, Mongkut welcomed foreigners and Chulalongkorn was a fervent moderniser. In their different separate ways, all the three kings entertained various proposals to construct a canal across the Isthmus of Kra only to see to their failure of taking off beyond the planning stages. The insecurity of Siam's independence at the height of European colonialism in Southeast Asia was the penultimate reason for Siam's refusal to realise the Kra Canal dream.

Keywords: Siam, Isthmus of Kra, Mongkut, Chulalongkorn, Kra Canal

ABSTRAK

Segenting Kra yang terletak di utara Tanah Melayu merupakan pembahagi tanah yang mengasingkan Lautan Adaman dengan Teluk Thailand. Pembinaan sebuah terusan merentas Segenting Kra yang lebarnya tidak melebihi 50 batu akan menjimatkan lebih daripada 1,500 batu perjalanan di antara Eropah dengan Asia Timur serta mengurangkan tiga hari masa pelayaran. Apa yang pada awalnya nampak sebagai satu projek yang logik dan boleh menguntungkan telah menjadi sebuah mimpi yang tidak boleh dicapai. Artikel ini akan melihat kepada persaingan-persaingan untuk membina Terusan Kra daripada 1824 hingga 1910 di bawah pemerintahan Raja Rama III Phra Nangklao, Raja Rama IV Mongkut dan Raja Rama V Chulalongkorn. Secara kebetulan, era ketiga-tiga raja ini melambangkan jangka masa pemodenan Siam dalam masa perkembangan penjajahan Barat. Ketiga-tiga era merujuk kepada cara berlainan untuk berdepan dengan penjajahan Barat – Phra Nangklao bersifat tutup pintu, Mongkut mempelawa kemasukan pengaruh asing dan Chulalongkorn mementingkan pemodenan. Di dalam cara mereka yang tersendiri, ketiga-tiga raja Siam ini melayan projek pembinaan Terusan Kra di Segenting Kra. Namun demikian, walaupun wujudnya pelbagai tinjauan dan kajian dilaksanakan, semua cadangan pembinaan Terusan Kra gagal bergerak daripada pelan permulaan. Artikel ini mendapati kesemua cadangan pembinaan Terusan Kra menghadapi jalan buntu. Ketidakyakinan raja-raja Siam terhadap memelihara kedaulatan negara merupakan sebab utama yang menggagalkan projek pembinaan Terusan Kra.

Kata kunci: Siam, Segenting Kra, Mongkut, Chulalongkorn, Terusan Kra

INTRODUCTION

Linking the Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Thailand with a maritime canal is not a new idea. The Kra Canal was first proposed by King Narai of Ayutthaya (1629-1688) in 1677. However after four centuries, despite various endeavours – surveys, feasibility studies and concessions given – the proposed Kra Canal remained on the drawing board. For some, this perennially-shelved project is an elusive dream for Thailand and the world. They cite the proposed canal could revitalise Thailand's global position, while others feel the Kra Canal is a totally

non-viable project that would save neither time nor solve any of Thailand's economic woes. Worse still, detractors argue, the project will fail to uplift the local economy of Southern Thailand. Balancing both schools of thoughts, the Kra Canal – if constructed – would join the ranks of the world's busiest and most important canal projects. The Suez Canal and the Panama Canal faced numerous challenges and hurdles in their planning, excavation and construction. But, unlike the Kra Canal, these canals were successfully excavated and are in operation today.

During the reigns of King Rama IV Mongkut (1851-1868) and Rama V Chulalongkorn (1868-1910), three

national economic projects came into prominence – the telegraphic communication with Singapore, India and Europe; the railway line linking Bangkok and British Malaya and the excavation of the Kra Canal along the narrow Isthmus of Kra. While the former two projects were initiated and somewhat completed by the end of Chulalongkorn's reign, the question of the Kra Canal remained unanswered. The idea of the Kra Canal recurred time and time again within the interplays of the Siamese, British and French during much of the 19th and 20th centuries. Even when attempts were made to revive the Kra Canal project in the 20th and 21st centuries; none were successful beyond the drawing board. Concerns of the canal were sporadic and often generated fresh interest. However, such interests subsequently died off. Perhaps such grandiose ideas on the Kra Canal were discarded when antagonistic forces, political or economic concerns gained the day.

LAND ROUTES ACROSS THE ISTHMUS OF KRA

Since ancient times, to reach China, Indian ships had to pass through either the Straits of Melaka or the Straits of Sunda. Owing to the prevalence of piracy in these narrow waters, travelers often sought to avoid these sea routes. Instead, they used a number of overland short cuts across the Isthmus of Kra (D.G.E. Hall 1981). During the period of the emerging Hindu-Buddhist empires in Southeast Asia, there were about a dozen well-defined overland routes for portage trade across the Isthmus of Kra. Archaeological discoveries along these overland routes date back to the early days of Indian penetration of the region, and during the empire of Srivijaya. "The empire of Srivijaya maintained strict control over the straits and forced all ships to put in at one or other of its ports," wrote D.G.E. Hall. Among the ports across the Isthmus of Kra included Takua Pa on the western side to Ch'aiya on the eastern side, or from Kedah to Singgora. There were also other overland routes from Tavoy over the Three Pagoda Pass, by the Kanburi river to the valley of the Menam Chao Phraya (D.G.E. Hall).

At the height of Srivijaya in the 8th century AD, the land routes across the Isthmus of Kra were the only routes that were not economically controlled by the Srivijayans. Initially Palembang controlled the India-China trade through their domination of the sea routes via the Straits of Melaka, but to ensure complete domination of Srivijaya, PanPan / Tambaralinga were gradually absorbed into the Malay Alliance and thus anchored within the Srivayan empire (Paul Michel Munoz 2006).

In the 13th century, Chau Ju-kua wrote in *A Description of Barbarous People*, that Ligor was known as Tong-liu-mei. He described the country of Tong-liu-mei as to the west of Chon-la. The products found at Tong Liu Mei include cardamoms, *the tsen, ch'on* and *su* (varieties of gharu-wood), yellow wax and red kino

gum. If there were already a ready-stock of trading goods, there must have been a strong trading environment in the Isthmus of Kra. Siamese documents written by Junkceylon (currently known as Phuket) officials in 1845 gave a brief description of the overland route across the Isthmus of Kra prior to 1785. Tin produced in Phuket and neighbouring districts on the mainland, as well as a number of articles were imported from the Coromandel coast, were conveyed across the Malay Peninsula towards the Siamese capital in Ayutthaya.

In 1820, John Crawfurd became among the first Westerners to write on the isthmian trade. He wrote, "The traffic between the countries lying on the shores of the Straits of Melaka and Bay of Bengal, with the Siamese capital, is conducted by three different routes over the mountains of the peninsula." (John Crawfurd 1967). Then, the land routes across the isthmus included between Kedah and Singgora, the second and most frequented between Trang and Ligor, and the third, between Punnin, opposite Phuket and Chai-ya. Crawfurd wrote the land part of the journey was usually between five and seven days on elephants – apparently the only form of transportation. Once these goods reached the Gulf of Siam, they were shipped in boats for Bangkok. By these routes, products such as tin and ivory from Phuket, swallow's nest, opium, Indian and British cotton goods were brought to Bangkok.

From ancient times to the early 19th century, portage trade and a land route across the Isthmus of Kra was a link joining the East-West trade. But, by the 19th century, it seems most of these portage routes have all but disappeared. As in John Crawfurd writings, trade was no longer the trans-shipment of India-China trade, but merely local trade from Southern Thailand to Bangkok. It was merely to transport provincial produce to the capital. Alas, the glorious age of the Isthmus of Kra, once the heart of the Hindu-Buddhist Empires in Southeast Asia was overtaken by the increasingly important trade routes via the Straits of Melaka. Economics also made sense – using elephants across jungle terrains could no longer compete with the steamer.

EARLY IDEAS OF THE KRA CANAL

When King Narai of Ayutthaya (1629-1688) suggested excavating the Kra Canal in 1677, he entered the history books as the earliest proponent of this grandiose project. Then, the Ayutthayan king said the canal would allow an efficient trading route between the east and west of his Siamese Empire. King Narai's proposal predated King Rama I Phutthayotfa Chulaloke (1782-1809) younger brother's proposal by more than a century, but some research identified the first proponent of the Kra Canal project surfaced only in 1793. However, King Narai's historical evidence of the Kra Canal comes from a letter from the Siamese Ambassador to France – Phraya Kosa

Thibordi's, currently displayed at a museum in Paris. Interestingly also, the French became the first western power to be interested in digging a canal at the Isthmus of Kra.

Unlike King Narai's economic and trade benefits for Siam, King Rama I's younger brother Khrom Phra Rajawangborworn Mahasurasihanart (also known as Prince Surasihanaj or Prince Bovornmahasurasinghanart) design of the Kra Canal or a giant *klong* connecting Songkhla and Saiburi (Perlis) was for military and security reasons. The Chakri prince wanted to protect the towns on the Andaman coast from Burmese attacks. He became the first advocate for the canal to be used militarily – to move ships and men to recover parts of Tenasserim provinces lost to Burma in 1760 (Patrick Low & Yeung Yue-man 1973). His preferred route was across the peninsula further to the south which would avoid the mountains and join the Lake of Songkhla with the Indian Ocean.

KRA CANAL PROPOSALS DURING KING RAMA III PHRA NANGKLAO (1824-1851)

While King Narai and Khrom Phra's proposals for the Kra Canal were among the earliest, they remained very much ideas and nothing more than that. No feasibility studies were ever conducted. It took a few decades later during King Rama III Phra Nangklao's (1824-1851) reign that the first serious attempt was made to excavate the Kra Canal across the Isthmus of Kra. When Rama III ascended the Siamese throne in 1824, it was at a time of flux for European colonialism in Southeast Asia. Then, the French and British were planning their early assaults in Southeast Asia and China. Siam was no different. At first, European colonialism came, not by military force or by gunships, but by merchant traders of the East India Companies of the French, British and Dutch. Siam was already at the heart of Southeast Asian trade, especially trade with China, then known as the red-money bag trade. Perhaps, that was why, Siam under Rama III was cautious in its dealings with the West.

Perhaps in the name of advancing trade, it was during King Rama III's reign that Captain Henry Burney, later the British Resident in Ava (Burma), made the earliest European survey of the Isthmus of Kra in 1825. He wrote, "It is possible, that if the tides are high, the Ranong river and the Chumphon River are only separated by a four-hour trek. From, Ranong River, you may arrive at the Seat of the Pya or Governor of Chumphon in eight hours" (The Burney Papers, 3 February 1825). In a memorandum to the Court of Siam, Burney pointed out the availability of free navigation of the rivers between Trang and the Kra from their mouths to their sources as well as the free and unimpeded intercourse overland with Patani and the tin-rich areas in the interior. He also said between, Ligor and Singgora and the other ports on the eastern coast of

the Malayan Peninsula, there were fair and moderate duties on the articles on transit or exportation by either seas (The Burney Papers 1824).

Burney believed it was a commercial advantage for Siam to open a maritime channel for the produce of the eastern part of Siam to be traded directly with the Bay of Bengal. Burney said "This saves the circum-navigation of the whole of the Malay Peninsula. The distance is said not to exceed 20 leagues and between Ligor and Trang, the trans-isthmian journey can be performed in seven days, for the greater part there is water communication and the portage is easily provided for by the use of elephants which abound can be easily caught and trained in two months,"

However, Burney's memorandum was unsuccessful. Besides excavating the canal, Burney wanted Siam to cede the Island of Salang or Phuket to the British Government. Then, the latter seemed almost impossible. Perhaps, Burney's memorandum also included political demands such as restoration of the Sultan of Kedah, the disavowal of the Siamese claims of superiority over any of the Malay States on the Peninsula South of Patani and the free exportation from all Siamese ports on the western side of the Peninsula (The Burney Papers 1824). This was not what Siam wanted.

In the 1840s, the Commissioner of the Tenasserim Province of British Burma, Sir Henry Mortimer Durand floated the idea of a canal project across the Isthmus of Kra. Unlike Henry Burney in 1824-1826, Durand conducted no proper studies or surveys of the Isthmus. He conveyed his Kra Canal ideas to the British Government in India questioning the sovereignty of the Isthmus of Kra, "The southern boundary of the British territories is the Kra or Pakchan River from the sea as far as the junction of these streams, but beyond this point it was undecided" (C.O. 273/414, Foreign Office to Board of Trade, 23 February 1914). Though Durand's proposal of the Kra Canal cannot be strongly viewed as anything more than serious, it is nonetheless important as he looked at the Isthmus of Kra as a strategic asset, in which British sovereignty of the region can be considered.

Following a speculative report on the Kra Canal in the Moulmein Chronicle in 1843, Captain G.B. Tremenheere, Executive Engineer of the Tenasserim Provinces (Burma) wrote a report on the practicality of executing a canal across the Isthmus of Kra. In the company of E.A. Blundell and Dr D. Richardson, and in the steamer Hoogly, they sailed to the Pakchan River and examined the isthmus. Tremenheere found the mouth of the Pakchan River was more than two miles wide and can afford the admission of the largest ships at that time. Tremenheere was fervent in his belief the physical difficulties in cutting a maritime canal were not insurmountable, but they ought, perhaps, to be pronounced impracticable. Their suggestions were later reconsidered due to high ground elevations between Chumphon and Pakchan which would make an excavation difficult – of which the highest points were reckoned at

450 feet (Manich Jumsai 2000). At that time, it was not possible for Tremenheere to measure the various levels instrumentally, and although he accompanied his report with a sketch of the locality, his findings still lacked accuracy (Herbert Smith 1975).

In 1849, Deputy Commissioner of Pegu (in Burma), Edward O'Riley examined the Pakchan River and its surrounding. Then, he found the Kaman branch river, falling into Pakchan at a distance of 18 miles from its mouth. He believed the region possessed natural features that would facilitate the undertaking of a maritime canal. Unlike Tremenheere's finding in 1843, O'Riley believed, the South of the Kra, the centre of the isthmus was much lower in altitude, and with deep valleys the canal could be built without the need for deep excavation. He estimated the distance to be dug to be a maximum of 25 to 30 miles (Jumsai 2000). Not unlike Tremenheere's findings, O'Riley lack of observations with proper instruments detracted the British or Siamese from pursuing his maritime canal suggestion (Smith 1975).

O'Riley estimated sailing vessels from India would save an average of 25 days and steamers, eight to nine days at the lowest. Interestingly, O'Riley was also among the first Kra Canal proponents to discover the mineral riches of Southern Thailand, including coal at the upper course of the Tenasserim river and at Lenya, its southern feeder, as well as gold mines of the Lenya, and the upper waters of the Pakchan river. Incidentally, O'Riley was the earliest Kra Canal proponent who believed in other reasons besides strategic and military reasons of a canal excavation.

KRA CANAL PROPOSALS DURING KING RAMA IV MONGKUT (1851-1868)

In 1851, King Rama IV Mongkut succeeded his brother King Rama III Phra Nangklao (1824-1851) to the Siamese throne. Unlike his predecessor, Mongkut engaged the European powers. During his reign, Siam opened its trade to the Europeans, chiefly to British Trade after the Treaty of Bowring in 1855. It was this level of openness and close contact with the Europeans that the Kra Canal project became seriously considered.

THE BRITISH INITIATIVE: 1855-1858

After the historical Bowring Treaty of 1855, John Bowring, British Governor in Hong Kong, discussed the Kra Canal project with Mongkut and his ministers. It was reported Mongkut was willing to aid the undertaking of the maritime canal. Bowring wrote to London in favour of the Kra Canal project, and asked for every encouragement to be given to such an important undertaking (C.O.273 /414, Foreign Office to Board of Trade, 23 February 1914). Bowring wrote, "A ship canal, if practicable,

would be next in importance to those which have been proposed across the Isthmus of Darien in America, and that of Suez in Egypt; and it is to be hoped that our opening relations with Siam will lead to an investigation and solution of a question so interesting to geographical and commercial inquiry. This would, indeed, be a noble work; and if the information I've received be correct, a few miles of canalisation are only required to unite the navigable river-communications in voyages between India and Eastern Asia, and thus avoiding the long detour by the Straits of Melaka, may often be estimated not by days, but by weeks."

Following Bowring's suggestion, the British Consul in Bangkok, Sir Robert Schomburgk personally inspected the Isthmus of Kra and wrote in favour of a ship canal in 1858 (Jumsai 2000). Schomburgk said, "In viewing the different points of importance, I will dwell in the first instance upon the advantage accruing to Calcutta in her commerce with China. The chart will show the distance which would actually be saved by going from Calcutta to Hong Kong should such a canal exist. Notwithstanding so great a gain, this is merely a question of time, and the expense resulting there from while the perilous route through the Strait of Melaka, and the frequent disasters to property and life occurring to vessels propelled by sails or steam through those intricate passages, ought to be the great lever to press the plan of a canal through the Isthmus of Kra upon the civilised world."

In 1858, the construction of a maritime canal to unite the Bays of Bengal and Siam was also recommended to the Siamese Government by Captain John Richards of Her Britannic Majesty's Ship *Saracen*. He obtained full permission to survey the coasts of Siam by Mongkut. Then, it was widely believed Mongkut authorised British engineers to dig and construct a canal from Ranong to Chumphon. Although Ranong-Chumphon was the shortest canal route across the isthmus, the project was suspended after cost reportedly got out of hand. Presumably the route encountered difficulty in cutting across a mountain range.

Wise of Lloyd brought up the issue of the Kra Canal to the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Fourth Lord Clarendon George Villers and the British Government. The British Board of Trade and the Indian Government acknowledged the importance – both commercially and politically – of the canal. Then, Wise suggested the Indian Sepoy Rebellion of 1857 would provide an ample supply of manual labour to the Kra Canal site at St. Matthew Island or Elephant Island situated on the eastern side of the Bay of Bengal (F.O. 69/105 Historical Memo by A. Walmisley 17 October 1881 cited in Herbert Smith 1975). However, the Board of Trade did not concur with Wise's proposal. The Board wrote to the Governor General of India, it was "expedient to remove convicts of the class a locality more distant from the scene of their crimes than the island indicated."

Wise of Lloyds made one or two additional overtures to the British and Siamese Governments but the question of the canal was allowed to drop. Besides the proposed Kra Canal, Wise of Lyold applied for a scheme to construct and operate a railway across the Kra Isthmus. But this too, came to a standstill after failure to reach agreement on terms and conditions. Interestingly, Wise's railway scheme became the first suggestion to build a railway line at the Isthmus of Kra.

In 1859, a report by Sir R. Schomburgk on the advantages and feasibility of a canal through the Isthmus of Kra was laid before British Parliament in Westminster. Perhaps the biggest change of the Kra Canal proposal came when British took control of Lower Burma in 1858. The proposed Kra Canal was seriously favoured to facilitate trade between India and China. During Schomburgk's consulship, two projects were pushed by the British to open up Thailand – the digging of the Kra Canal and a telegraphic communication with Singapore, India and Europe (Jumsai 2000). The telegraphic project was granted a concession by Mongkut. However, due to lack of funds and inability to find interested partners, the British Government presumably dropped the Kra Canal project. In the end, Schomburgk's effort to bring the Kra Canal proposal closer to Mongkut failed. The Siamese King remained non-committal of the canal project.

CAPTAIN ALEXANDER FRASER AND CAPTAIN J.G.
FURLONG'S SURVEY: 1863

In March and April 1863, an engineering team headed by British engineers, Captain Alexander Fraser and Captain J.G. Furlong surveyed the Isthmus of Kra. In the steamer *Nemesis*, Fraser and Furlong journeyed from the mouth of Pakchan River to Kra, and crossed the Isthmus of Kra to the Gulf of Siam. Besides reporting on a route, they found prospective tin-mines in the vicinity as well as provided some geographical description of the Isthmus. In their report, Fraser and Furlong said: "We think we have done so satisfactorily that as a mere speculation, the construction of a railway across the Isthmus of Kra, will be profitable; that the communication may be established for a third of the capital, the interest of which is now being expended yearly on mere fuel and establishment of running steamers, and that a vast amount of time will be saved over present routes" (Loftus 1883).

However, Fraser and Furlong's findings' recommending a canal is impractical because of mountains in the area. Perhaps as steam power increasingly grew in importance, their report suggested building a railway instead. For Fraser and Furlong, if the British do not build a railway line, France must take the opportunity to do so. Unfortunately, Fraser and Furlong's survey was rather hastily and roughly conducted. It was at times said, Fraser and Furlong's survey made no real contribution. For example, another Kra Canal proponent Commander A.J. Loftus pointed out serious miscalculations of Fraser

and Furlong in the 1880s – Fraser and Furlong estimated the height of the Kra Pass at 75 feet instead of the actual 250 feet.

In the end, increasing competing French-British imperial interests in Siam prompted Mongkut to decline any further permission to conduct a survey or construct a canal at the Isthmus of Kra. It was not for another eight years in 1866 that the Kra Canal proposal resurfaced again. In 1866, upon nearing the completion of the Suez Canal connecting the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, the French requested permission to dig a canal to connect the seas on both sides of Thailand. Unfortunately, Mongkut refused permission in deference to British interest in Penang and Singapore (Supradit Kanwanich, *Bangkok Post*, 2 January 2000).

KRA CANAL PROPOSALS DURING
KING RAMA V CHULALONGKORN (1868-1910)

King Rama V Chulalongkorn (1868-1910) succeeded his father, Rama IV Mongkut on 1 October 1868. Being the first Siamese king to travel abroad, Chulalongkorn's liberal education and his eye-opening travels made his long reign the era of Siamese modernisation. Unlike Rama III Phra Nangklao's isolationist policies, Chulalongkorn developed close relations with the West, particularly the British, and to a lesser extent the French. Dubbed the Father of Modern Siam, Chulalongkorn changed the Siamese people's mindsets and attitudes including abolishing slavery and corvée labour. In addition, he introduced modern education, and brought new technology such as telegraph lines and railway networks to Siam.

By the closing of the 19th century, only Siam was spared the brunt of increasing European colonialisation in Southeast Asia. Unlike its neighbouring states, Chulalongkorn managed to retain Siam's independence, notwithstanding ceding some outlying territories such as the Northern Malay States, parts of Laos and Cambodia to the British and French. During Chulalongkorn's reign, the Suez Canal was opened in 1869, easing the trade from Europe to Asia, bypassing the Cape of Good Hope in Africa. Perhaps Chulalongkorn's close contact with the Europeans made the revival of the Kra Canal a popular proposal. In his reign, Chulalongkorn entertained several requests of piercing the Isthmus of Kra. But ultimately, in the end, none moved beyond the drawing block although several feasibility studies were made and proved the project's viability.

THE FRENCH SCHEME

In 1872, a representative of the British Government and later employed by the Siamese Government, Captain Alfred John Loftus of the British Royal Navy, made a survey from the Gulf of Chumphon, along the Chumphon River, the Elephant Route and the Kra River to its mouth.

The survey indicated, "Cutting a canal through the Kra is not an impossibility." However, Loftus reported the difficulties of cutting a canal were greater than anticipated. He concluded an undertaking, while if not impossible, was at least impracticable. In his *Notes of a Journey Across the Isthmus of Kra*, Loftus wrote to Lieutenant Bellion in charge of the French Survey Expedition, "Here is my unbiased conviction which I have formed from my experience and knowledge of the country, extending over a period of 28 years, and from what I have seen during the late expedition. I may safely state that from Singapore to the parallel of Bangkok Bay, there is not any portion of the Malay Peninsula practicable for the excavation of a ship canal that would answer any profitable purpose. I may say that such a scheme is impossible."

In 1881, French diplomat, Ferdinand de Lesseps started the French Expedition by surveying the Isthmus of Kra. Interestingly, de Lesseps had created a name as the fame builder of the Suez Canal in Egypt. He reputedly abandoned the Panama Canal after finding the Kra Canal to be feasible. Even the British Agent and Consul General in Bangkok, W.Gifford Palgrave, reported de Lesseps' scheme boasted of having obtained French official support. Unlike Loftus, de Lesseps reported it was feasible to dig a canal. and applied to Chulalongkorn for a charter to build and operate the canal but the request was denied. Chulalongkorn wanted a comprehensive report on the benefits of the canal – not only for the company, but also for Siam. Apparently, De Lesseps' application was "gracefully fended off" (Willard A. Hanna 1967).

Ironically, in a letter from the British Directors of the Suez Canal to the British Foreign Office, it was reported de Lesseps received the right by Chulalongkorn to construct a canal. The directors wrote, de Lesseps was undecided whether to form a company for the construction of the canal, or to place the undertaking in the hand of the Suez Canal Company (C.O.273 /414, Foreign Office to Board of Trade, 23 February 1914). British Consul in Bangkok, Palgrave religiously reported to London the on-goings of the French Expedition in the Southern Peninsula. In 1882, Palgrave wrote to the Earl of Granville, "A company of French-Engineers headed by a French Naval Officer, Commander Bellion, professing to have been commissioned by the Suez Canal Company, led for an execution of what they claim to be a scientific, an engineering survey of the track of the often projected Kra Canal."

In the 1880s, Bellion was believed to be representing de Lesseps' interest in Siam Then, Bellion's expedition was recorded by Captain A.J. Loftus in his *Notes of a Journey Across The Isthmus of Kra*. In the survey of the Isthmus of Kra, Bellion examined the parallels of Langsuen and Kra for the purpose of constructing a maritime canal at the isthmus. The survey was rather extensive with more than 20 elephants hired and guides supplied by the Governor of Chumphon to traverse the Isthmus of Kra. Though small, the French Expedition

were provided with a small coastal steamer and according to Palgrave, had intentions of remaining in Siam for several months. It was believed this subsequent French Expedition was part of the expansion of the Suez Canal Co, and it is expected to receive some assistance from the Siamese Government. Palgrave wrote,

If the King and other high Siamese official absent from Bangkok on a pleasure trip down to the coast, the French have a year to commence operation, and to announce their intention by early next year. (C.O.273/ 124/2751, W.G. Palgrave to Earl of Granville, 28 December 1882) The chief of the expedition is a canal officer, and says that there are difficulties from an engineering point of view, he positively adds that the proposed canal is in the best of Siam as it provides the access to both sides of the peninsula (C.O.273/ 120/10532 Governor of Straits Settlements to Earl of Darby Colonial Office, 9 May 1883)

In 1883, British Advisor in Bangkok, Ernest Satow reported Chulalongkorn apparently agreed to cut a canal across the Isthmus of Kra to be undertaken by the French. However, should there be any difficulties, the Siamese King had to be fully aware of the situation, Satow reported (C.O.273/ 124 /1628, British Advisor to Earl of Granville, 3 March 1883). Meanwhile, the Governor of Straits Settlements, Sir Cecil Smith reported the French Expedition faced no geographical difficulties in the Eastern and Western ends of the proposed canal. He made the assertion as the French expedition were said to be using British Admiralty's navigational charts of which Smith claims are trustworthy.

While the Kra Canal was largely seen as a Anglo-Franco affair, it is interesting to note the American Legation took a keen interest on the affair and reported the on goings of the proposed French project. In 1883, the American Legation in Bangkok recorded movements of the French Expedition and even played host to Bellion and his engineer corps in January 1883. John Halderman, American Ambassador to Bangkok said, "Commander Bellion represented the Suez Canal Company and Ferdinand De Lesseps in cutting across a canal" (Notes from the Siamese Legation in the United States to the Department of State 1876 – 1906, 16 January 1883). However, what was lacking in Halderman's dispatches was how the Americans would benefit from the French Scheme. Perhaps, the American Legation was merely keen to verify the conflicting reports on Chulalongkorn's concession as Halderman did acknowledge the Siamese king consented an audience to the French Expedition.

Nonetheless this French Expedition seemed trifle to some parties. The British Representatives in Singapore seemed sure that the project would take place. "It would appear that the King of Siam is anxious to concede to Mr Lesseps and think only the right of digging a canal across the Malay Peninsula" (C.O.273/ 124/2037 Foreign Office to Colonial Office, 3 February 1883). The British were aware de Lesseps was keen to set up a new company or considering to undertake the Kra Canal as an extension of Suez Canal Company. By 1884, the French were

reported to have completed their survey of the isthmus. But a failure to obtain a Royal Charter, French efforts came to a standstill.

As the French became increasingly keen on the proposed Kra Canal, the British representative in Bangkok became less keen. The British representative wrote on 15 January 1883, "The expedition, it is expected, to last from three to four months, but no one here anticipated a canal as a result, though other consequences may possibly follow" (C.O.273/ 124/ 3366 W. G. Palgrave to Earl of Granville, 15 January 1883). Palgrave believed the route taken by the French Engineers would prove futile. In a dispatch to Earl of Granville, Palgrave reported the French were accompanied by Siamese in the Royal Siamese Navy Corvett. Palgrave described the French route as the one surveyed earlier by de Loncle and was later abandoned after involving too much labour and obstruction of the height and character of the central ridge. If not, the French route would follow an earlier cutting point further south. According to Siamese Officials in Bangkok, many of whom have a fair practical acquaintance with the geographical surface in the region in question, Palgrave said, "the search will lead to more failure as the Southern route is where the peninsula back from becoming, broader, loftier and more rocky as the further south it goes" (C.O.273/ 124/ 3366, W.G. Palgrave to Earl of Granville, 15 January 1883).

By late 1883, British Acting Consul-General Will Newman wrote to Earl Granville, stating the French Kra Canal Scheme has been entirely abandoned. Accordingly, Newman's conversations with French representative in Bangkok, Count Kergaradec revealed the French policy is not to interfere in anyway with the independence of Siam. However, Kergaradec said the route, which has been surveyed by Captain Bellion is believed to be even more impractical than the route suggested by De Loncle. In February 1884, the probable cost of the French Kra Canal is estimated at not less than 500 million francs, and that the scheme has been abandoned. As an act of courtesy, the report of the Kra Canal survey was still presented to Chulalongkorn despite the French abandoning the scheme (C.O.273 / 131/5504 Foreign Office to Under Secretary of Colonial Office, 2 April, 1884).

In 1885, Satow remarked that the Siamese Government was understood to be averse from granting any concessions for a French canal across the Malay Peninsula, presumably were alive to be consequence which would follow if the French gained a footing. Also in 1885, Satow reported that James MacGregor found a feasible way less than 50 miles from the the present route. Interestingly, a last effort to revive the French Scheme came when Francois Deloncle, professed to act on behalf of De Lesseps, approached the Siamese Government in 1886. Apparently, the Siamese Government was offended by Deloncle's threatening tone, and not long later, Deloncle finally abandoned his Kra Canal project and sold his surveys and exploration rights to W.H. Read,

a Singapore businessman (Patrick Tuck 1995). However, Deloncle remained interested in the region, and continued to assert French influence in Siam.

While the earlier French attempts failed, the French did not give up their dream of getting a Kra Canal concession. According to dispatch by the Earl of Rosebery to Captain Jones, dated 19 August 1893, a local media reported the French Envoy in Bangkok, Myre de Villers applied to the Siamese Government for a concession to construct a ship canal across the Kra Peninsula. However, the likelihood of such a concession seems unlikely as Chulalongkorn positively declined the matter in 1886. Instead, Roseberry told Captain Jones to verbally inform Chulalongkorn on the objections of the British Government in the Malay Peninsula on the Kra Canal project (F.O. 422 /36 /186. No. 307 The Earl of Roseberry to Captain Jones, 19 August 1893).

THE BRITISH EXPEDITION AND THE MALAY PENINSULA EXPLORATION SYNDICATE

In May 1881, Messrs. Le Fevre and Co – apparently an English firm – applied to the Siamese Government through D.K. Mason, Siamese Consul General in London, for a concession to excavate a maritime canal across the Malay Peninsula. Then, it was reported the Siamese Government gave the original concession of the Kra Canal to the Siamese Consul General in London, D.K. Mason. However, when Mason was asked to prove his claim, he claimed to have lost the original Deed of Grant. It was believed Mason also enquired to the British Government whether such a proposal was made, and asked for more details on the project. However, in July 1881, the Siamese Minister of Foreign Affairs briefed Mason that on the Siamese side in Bangkok, there were no particulars on the canal request, and thus, no action on a concession could be taken without further information (F.O. 69/105 Foreign Office Banurwongse to Mason, 12 July 1881, cited in Herbert Smith).

In 1886, W.H. Read, the Singapore businessman, specifically stressed the importance of British control over construction projects in Southern Thailand. To counter the French influence, Read urged Sir Julian Pauncefoot of the British Foreign Office to form a powerful company to obtain concessions from Siam that must ultimately control much of the territory of the Malay Peninsula north from Penang to Bangkok (F.O. 69/112 Read to Pauncefoot 6 March 1886 in Herbert Smith). Read was tempered by designs on commercial advantage for Singaporeans in the Siamese-Malay states.

In response to W.H. Read's proposal on 18 December 1886, the Malay Peninsula Exploration Syndicate was founded in London, with Sir E. J. Reed as its Consulting Engineer. The syndicate's objective was to acquire from Deloncle, all the rights and surveys to the Kra Canal. Interestingly, the syndicate was founded not only to excavate the Kra Canal but to construct roads, railways,

and tramways, to work mines and fisheries, canals for irrigation and other purposes, and to reclaim and improve lands, to provide sewage, drainage, water supply, gas and to build hotels, warehouses, markets and public buildings (F.O.422 / 14 / 185 No. 2, Satow to The Earl of Iddesleigh (Foreign Office), 23 December 1886). Under its areas of jurisdiction would include the Malay States of Songkhla Lakhon, Trang, Taloung, Satun and Patanni.

However, British Government Minister in Bangkok Ernest Satow was sceptical whether the Siamese Government would be disposed favourably or entertain the syndicate's request. Satow informed the Foreign Ministry, if the Syndicate's application is approved, the British Government would be prepared to give its support but the British prefers the exploration to be made in such a way not to attract public attention (F.O.422/13/185 No. 1, Sir P Currie to Sir R Herbert, 4 January 1886). Satow wrote numerous correspondences with the British Government in Singapore and London over the developments of the proposed canal for more than a decade in the 1880s and 1890s. However, in a private conversation with a Siamese Prince, Satow acknowledged that no concession would ever be given. According to Satow, "The Minister Prince replied very distinctly and firmly that the King would not give a concession for a maritime canal to anyone" (F.O.422 / 14 / 185 No. 2, Satow to The Earl of Iddesleigh (Foreign Office), 23 December 1886). Satow noted, the only concession Chulalongkorn was willing to offer was the building of railways and mines, as indicated in his birthday speech of 21 September 1886. However, Satow wrote, that despite failed attempts, the French had found a feasible route less than 50 kilometres south of Kra in 1885. The proposed route was from Bangri on the West Coast to Phanom on the East Coast (C.O. 273 / 137 / 19729, Mr Satow to Marquis of Salisbury, 11 November 1885).

In 1886, Sir Cecil Clementi Smith (1887-1893) in his dispatches to London included a vote on exploring expenses on the feasibility of the Kra Canal by W. Cameron. Then the Governor of the Straits Settlements in Singapore, Smith advised "any study on the Kra Canal has to be done without attracting any attention." Smith suggested instead of employing a British-led expedition, he suggested W. McCarthy, who was already in the employment of Chulalongkorn. "I have every reason to believe, McCarthy is a loyal British citizen, but who is employed by the Siamese Government," he said (C.O. 273 / 141 / 21771 Proposed Kra Canal Through The Kra Isthmus, 28 October 1886). Smith acknowledged a British-led expedition might be futile due as reports of an expedition in 'Nature of 9 September 1886' by Captain Fraser and Furlong showed it is not possible to excavate a canal across the Isthmus of Kra. Then the report on a journey from the mouth of the Pakchan river to Trang and then across the Isthmus to the Gulf, was complete with calculations of distance and cost. Thus,

Smith proposed that the British Government not to take any further steps to re-survey the Isthmus of Kra.

It was believed the Siamese Government did give the London-based Malay Peninsula Exploration Syndicate a concession for the construction of a ship-canal across the Malay Peninsula between Kra and the other side of the peninsula. By September 1893, the syndicate was running into financial difficulties and although the syndicate was the possessor valuable investigations, surveys, and studies made on the spot at a cost of upwards of £30,000, it was not able to continue with the canal construction.

In 1893, the syndicate's secretary, Edward H. Fletcher wrote, "When this Syndicate was formed an assurance was made that the Government of Siam would entertain no objection on principle to the construction of the canal, and: that provided certain interests were safeguarded there would be no difficulty in granting the concession." Fletcher was concerned that the syndicate's financial crisis may result in its interest being prejudiced by the British Government's growing significance in South Thailand and the Malay Peninsula. Then, the syndicate's work on the Kra Canal project had remained quiescent or stalled. Thus, Fletcher wanted the British Government to protect and consider the syndicate's interest in the region (F.O.422/36/386, Malay Peninsula Exploration Syndicate to Earl of Roseberry, 6 September 1893).

As usual, the response of the British government was non-committal. The British Foreign Office, T.H. Sanderson, replied the British Government is studying this matter. There were then no further correspondence between the syndicate and the British Government. In 1893 when the Malay Peninsula Exploration Syndicate stalled its concessions, there was concern over press reports in Bangkok that the French Special Envoy to Bangkok, Myre de Villers, would apply for a concession to construct the ship canal across the Kra Peninsula (F.O. 422/ 36/ 186 No. 48, The Earl of Roseberry to Captain Jones, 19 August 1893). The British Foreign Office's Earl of Roseberry was adamant that immediate steps have to be taken for safeguarding British interest in the Malay Peninsula especially if special rights or privileges were granted to any foreign power or company. Then, British Advisor in Bangkok, Sir P. Currie described Viller's attempt as nothing more than "a favourite French scheme" and the "canal is one of their 'Mo-yens de Seduction.'" Then, Earl of Kimberley told Currie that "a canal in French hands must be resisted to the utmost" but if Britain "had an equal share in the management he would not object."

The French's attempt in 1893 raised questions on the Kra Isthmus. These questions were debated in the British Parliament, particularly by Sir Charles Dilke and Lord Curzon. Officially however, the British Government gave guarded and polite answers so as not to offend French susceptibilities. British Foreign Office said that till "we have some reason for thinking that French designs in the Isthmus are serious only then the British would take

action.” In 1893, British Ambassador in Paris, Lord Dufferin was instructed to make verbal representations to the French Government on their demands on Siam, and to state with reference on the proposed Kra Canal or any other measures or projects that might affect Siamese possessions in the Malay Peninsular. Then, the British felt Southern Thailand / Malay Peninsular were under British sphere of influence.

Interestingly, what started of as a strong British Scheme to pierce the Isthmus of Kra faded into oblivion in 1893. Not surprisingly, due to the competing nature of Britain and France in Southeast Asia, the French became the successor of the Malay Peninsular Exploration Syndicate scheme. Unfortunately, in the end, the French attempt to revive the British as well as their earlier French scheme was no more successful than before. It all ended with failure without a concession given by Chulalongkorn.

CONCLUSION

The study found that the dream of building a canal is not something new. The idea of the Kra Canal can be traced back to King Narai of Ayutthaya (1629-1688) and King Rama I (1782-1809) of the present dynasty. As the study progressed, it found the destiny of the proposed Kra Canal seemed very much in doubt – as it has been throughout history. This research shows the proposed Kra Canal was a dream full of vision, but one short of reality.

Since the fourth and fifth centuries AD, Indian and Chinese trading ships called on both sides of the narrow isthmus. Instead of circum-navigating the Straits of Melaka or the Straits of Sunda, early traders preferred the land-routes linking the isthmian ports such as Takuapa, Tavoy and Singgora (Songkhla) in Southern Thailand. Then, there were some 12 different trading routes across the narrow land strip. Archaeological evidence unearthed by the Siam Society in the 1930s further highlighted the traders' preference of the land routes instead of the “dangerous” roundabout sea route. By the 1820s, John Crawfurd became among the first westerners to document the isthmian trade. He wrote on a land journey that “takes between five and eight days by elephant or small ships that trail the natural rivers at the isthmus.” By the mid 19th century, the isthmian trade has all but disappeared due to natural silting-up of rivers in Southern Thailand, and later by the introduction of railway lines.

As the Bowring Treaty of 1855 marked Thailand's entry into the modern world, it also marked the return of the old dream of cutting the Kra Canal. No longer confined to Thai or Siamese's realm of dreams, this research found the Kra Canal to be an obsession among the British and the French in Southeast Asia. Not satisfied by opening Siam to Western trade, various expeditions were launched and concessions were sought to excavate a maritime canal at the Isthmus of Kra. However, this

research found competing British and French expeditions were not able to move beyond the stage of conducting feasibility studies.

Starting with King Rama III Phra Nangklao (1824-1851), Western powers started showing a strong interest in Siam. Both King Rama IV Mongkut (1851-1868) and King Rama V Chulalongkorn (1868-1910) entertained various western requests to the Kra Canal proposals. But in the end, no concessions for excavation were given. This research found that the insecurity of Siam's independence at the height of European Colonialism in Southeast Asia was the penultimate of Mongkut and Chulalongkorn's refusal to the proposed Kra Canal.

Yet, the story of the Kra Canal is one big dream that doesn't seem to fade, as it has proven to be for much of the last four centuries. The proposed Kra Canal was a scheme that was never quite abandoned. The idea and concept of a canal cutting the Isthmus of Kra will be resurrected again and again. The Kra Canal has created a legend in the history of Southeast Asia. It is, after all, an enduring idea which refuses to fade away through the ages. Yet, this article unfortunately finds the proposed Kra Canal to be a dream that has been tampered with reality. Even today, the excavation of the maritime canal remains as elusive as ever.

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