Bangkok and Asian Cities in Competition

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Abstract

‘Global system of cities’ has been discussed for decades focusing on major cities which a set of forces, economic, technological and political mainly, are operating together. However, such a comprehensive study on complex linkages between and among the global cities is undertaken hardly according to limitation of available data and information. Changes in technology, economic pattern and political policy, moreover, always influence strongly the global linkage system. Bangkok and other Asian major cities are part of the global system which may be viewed as one of the most dynamic regions that the economic crisis in 1997 is the obvious case.

As the higher pressure on regional economy is increasing greatly, many global cities are competing to play the greater roles in the region, in most cases, the greatest in the world. The competition seems to be never ending. From a different viewpoint, Bangkok is unlikely the competitor, probably it is struggling not to be the greater, but to survive from a number of its chronic urban problems.

Historical Development in Brief

Some scholars consider Bangkok as a new city regarding its foundation of the new capital of the Kingdom in April 1782. However, Bangkok may, in fact, date from the reign King Prajai (1534-1546) when a string of small fortress-town was established along the river to guard the more important waterways leading from the Chao Phraya across the delta south of Ayudthaya, the capital (Sternstein, 1982).

Nicolas Gervaise, writing of mid-seventeenth century, describes ‘Bangkok’ as the most important place in the Kingdom of Siam. He adds that ‘It is protected by walls only on the side facing the river’ which waters it on the east and south, Thon Buri, not Bangkok, is on the western bank of Chao Phraya river (Sternstein, 1982). In fact, Thon Buri is on the west and Bangkok is on the east.

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A fort on the east bank appears to have been built first in the 1660s to the design and under the supervision of Father Thomas, an Italian member of a French Jesuit missionary group which came to Ayutthaya in 1664.

In 1686 a distinguished French naval officer, the Chevalier de Forbin, modernized the fortifications at Thon Buri and Bangkok.

The small settlements became more important not only in terms of security function but also the meeting place for overseas traders where all large ships anchored and transferred their goods into smaller boats sailing upstream to the hinterlands.

After the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767, Thon Buri became the capital of the Kingdom for 15 years. As a result of political change, King Rama I moved the citadel from the west to the east bank considering additional security from the Burmese. It took three years to complete the new capital. In the view of Sternstein, Bangkok was planned meticulously in the image of Ayutthaya, the lay out of the city and the form of the principal structures being intended to correspond as closely as possible to Ayutthayan prototypes. The honours, of course, belong to Ayutthaya, the rubble of which was embedded in the palaces, monasteries, and fortifications of Bangkok which were built in the likeness and carried the names of their splendid prototypes.

In other words, King Rama I did not wish to create a wholly new city but to re-create Ayutthaya, to reproduce the form of the old capital as an essential part of his wish to restore the whole way of the Ayutthayan way of life (Sternstein, 1982).

It should be noted that Bangkok was born during the most troubled time for Thai warriors fighting against the Burmese invasion. In beautiful poetry, the formal name of Bangkok, therefore, gave the hope, the promise and the confidence of prosperous living in the new capital of the whole kingdom.

Bangkok and Modernism, 1868 to 1932

The greatest changes of Bangkok during the early period were in the reign of King Rama V (1868-1910), King Chulalongkorn merits the title ‘Great’ for even one of the many and remarkable reforms made during his long and memorable reign.

During a reign of nearly half a century, King Chulalongkorn attempted a thoroughgoing reformation. Such a task could not be accomplished quickly, but evidence of ‘thousand efforts of modernism’ accumulated and at the end of the reign Thailand had changed, the signs of modernization being nowhere more obvious than at the capital. Great section of the massive crenellated city wall had been demolished
to provide road metal for the two hundred kilometers of carriageways which crossed the network of canals on substantial, yet graceful, bridges of iron and marble (Sternstein, 1982).

Banking facilities, hotels, a hospital and a nursing home, a university and several secondary schools, a library and a museum, one of the finest race-courses in the East, and a number of school-cultural-athletic clubs, were among the amenities provided for modern living. Still, the majority of the half-million people of Bangkok lived a very much less than modern life (Sternstein, 1982).

King Chulalongkorn truly brought the kingdom into the modern world and the signs of modernization, moreover, he worked hard on arranging the administration as well as on legal reform, as both were necessary for effective management.

Thailand had never been colonized and in the 19th century, the Thai kingdom succeeded in the slow process of bureaucratic reform and modernization. In terms of administrative restructuring, King Chulalongkorn aimed at centralising power in the government because he demanded an effective tool for control over the kingdom after loosing territory to the British and the French. It is unfortunate that the King’s strategy on decentralisation was less important. After the revolution in 1932, however, his attitude towards centralizing the local administration and power was of benefit to the military government.

The elegant and glorious period of development of Bangkok ended after the revolution on 24 June 1932 which terminated the era of absolute monarchy in the Siamese kingdom. Bangkok was well planned during this period because the king had used his absolute power to proceed with Bangkok city planning by command and control. Bypassing the administrative and legal system, his command was effective in development management and implementation.

Instability and Transition, 1932 to 1960

For 27 years from 1932 to 1960, Thailand experienced 13 coups and seven constitutions under the administrations of 29 governments. Apparently, the lack of political stability and unity in this period was a major cause of Bangkok’s problems. As a result, urban problems in Bangkok increased under the administration of ‘come and go’ governments which had no interest in Bangkok city planning.

Since the political changes in 1932, the democratic movement did not progress as military controlled the country for decades. People did not understand what
democracy was about and the military governments concentrated on the struggle for power. Consequently, Bangkok city planning was dominated by the military.

The resignation of King Rama VII (1925-1934) on 2 March 1934 as a result of strong political conflict was a turning point for the Royal Family and Thai politics. Prince Anan became King Rama VIII when he was only 10 years old. However, King Rama VIII was assassinated on 9 June 1946 and his younger brother, Prince Bhumipol has become King Rama IX. The Royal Family did not get involved in politics during this period and Bangkok became a ground for power struggles among factions in the military and in the parliament.

The key person who influenced the development of Bangkok during this period was Field Marshal Phibun Songkram. Phibun played a very important role in the first coup from 11-25 October 1933 as a young Major standing at the frontier. He was in command at Bang Sue, a railway junction north of Bangkok while rebels took over Bangkok airport at Don Muang, some kilometers away. Bangkok in the 1930s was still compact and there were few roads in the city. Most people traveled by boat although railroad was the best means of transportation. The seasonal flood in October became a huge problem for the army because Phibun could not move his tanks and failed in his plan to attack the rebels by putting his tanks on carriages in front of a locomotive.

After that Phibun understood how important the road network was. This may explain why Phibun developed many new roads after he became Prime Minister in December 1938 starting the first military dictatorship regime in Thai history. He developed new roads to connect the military camps in and around Bangkok. Despite three assassination attempts and many bloody coups, Phibun survived and served as Prime Minister for many years, becoming one of the most dominant actors in Thai politics in the 1940s through to the 1950s.

As shown in the Figure 1, in Sternstein’s view, the worst aspect of Bangkok’s drive to modernize started at the end of the Second World War with the destruction of the urban waterways system. Roads intersected many canals and many waterways were buried beneath avenues. Many streets were widened by uprooting bordering shade trees. In short, the network of waterways was dismembered. Its function as a transportation has never been reconstituted by roadways.
Source: Department of Survey, Ministry of Defence

Figure 1 Plan of Bangkok, 1936.
More importantly, its function as a drainage system has not been replaced although a grandiose, costly sewerage, drainage and flood protection scheme was drawn up. The beauty of the waterways has been lost, while Bangkok has become as mean as any modern city anywhere, a ‘city of great distance’ since the 1960s. These words express the current image of Bangkok well because it takes so much time to go anywhere because of traffic congestion (Sternstein, 1982).

Despite their different geography and different chronicles, the urban history of Bangkok and other older towns have something in common. The ancient planning of these towns followed a similar pattern of imposing human order on the natural environment to achieve both social and political purposes (Stout, 1996), as did Bangkok. This crucial fact is overlooked in Thai society. People understand history only from what they learned in class and what is written in Thai history. This may explain why people have a general knowledge about Bangkok but know very little, probably nothing, about its planning history.

However, little attempt was made to foster interest in the serious consequences of failures in planning practice in this period. One of these consequences was the increasing degree of urban primacy of Bangkok.

**Bangkok and Urban Primacy**

In 1959, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) started a Public Administration Project on Bangkok city planning with a contribution of US$1.4 million. Litchfield, Whiting & Bowne, a U.S. private contractor for USAID, was working on *The Greater Bangkok Plan 2533 (A.D.1990)*, the first modern plan for the country. A technical term of urban primacy or primate city was mentioned officially for the first time in the country.

Bangkok has been a primate city for decades as shown in Table 1. It is a primate city by any definition (London, 1980) both in terms of size and function. As a result of a national policy which has been biased and neglected balanced development for decades, Bangkok has become the primate metropolis and has extended its boundary to cover all nearby provinces. It is undisputed that the urban primacy of Bangkok is a serious concern causing a number of chronic problems.

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3 A ‘Primate City’ may be defined as the existence of one overwhelmingly large city which dominates the nation functionally as well as in terms of size (London, 1980)
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Period</th>
<th>Multiplier</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1780-1900</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Data are limited and of uncertain accuracy, but Chiang Mai appears to have been the second most populous centre during the period 1780-1900.</td>
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<td>1900</td>
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<td>Chiang Mai was the second most populous centre during the period 1900-1950.</td>
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<td>1960</td>
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<td>Hat Yai-Songkla was the second most populous centre during the period 1960-1980. Hat Yai and Songkla are separate municipalities but there is reason to regard the two as comprising a twin-city. Taking Chiang Mai to be the second most populous centre would increase the multipliers for 1970 and 1980 to approximately 35 and 55, respectively</td>
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<td>1970</td>
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<td>1990</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Nakhon Ratchasima was the second most populous centre in the period</td>
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Source; Sternstein 1982, 1995

Table 1 Development of Bangkok Urban Primacy from 1780 to 1990

In the view of Bruce London, the primate city has historically been parasitic in Thailand and the nature of the primate city-hinterland relationship has changed over time with evolving national and international situations. His analysis is based on modern Thai history regarding the political primate city and the distribution of power in Thai society from 1850 to 1973. He argues that primate city parasitism is much more likely to exist in a situation in which an elite monopolises power and dominates decision-making and policy implementation than in a case in which power is decentralized (London, 1980). The power elite, which played a role in exploitative and neglectful policy-making during different period, is discussed by London to explain the development of the primate city.
Source: Litchfield, 1959 #81.

**Figure 2 Land Use in Bangkok, 1958**
In the Bangkok-Thonburi City Planning Project, Litchfield Whiting Bowne and Associates studied the urban primacy of Bangkok and pointed out the shortcomings in a technical monograph submitted to the Ministry of Interior in November 1959. Importantly, one of their many recommendations was to build up the economic health of other cities, which in turn would attract and support additional population. The regional cities such as Chiangmai, Korat (Nakhon Ratchasima) and Petchaburi were recommended for decentralization (Litchfield, 1959).

Cyrus Nims submitted a report ‘City Planning in Thailand’ in November 1963 and stressed the importance of controlling population growth in Bangkok. He recommended that the government should stimulate urban growth in other parts of the kingdom so that the migration of people to Bangkok could slow down. Importantly, he noted that a population of 6 to 9 million in 30 years would have serious consequences for the standard of living in Bangkok and for the economy generally (Nims, 1963).

Despite the first warning about the serious problem of urban primacy, the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB), which is responsible for planning at national level, did not include these crucial recommendations in its first national plan in 1961, On the contrary, the NESDB concentrated on the development of the capital city and its concise reason was economic efficiency. In fact, the national agenda on decentralization development policy on selected regional cities was written in the fifth national plan in 1982, some 20 years later.

It is worth noting that the most classic case of Bangkok city planning is the first master plan for Bangkok. It has been referred to numerous studies and has guided the preparations of many infrastructure development plans. The American consultants spent less than three years on their study. The Plan shown in Figure 3 was essentially a land use plan; blocks of different uses separated by access ways and coloured to produce a pleasant mosaic structure able to comfortably accommodate four and a half million people, attendant facilities and anticipated industrial growth in 1990 (Sternstein, 1971). The fact is the population of Bangkok in 1990 was nearly 6 million reflecting the failures of planning system in this period.

In Sternstein’s view, Thai authorities referred to ‘The Greater Bangkok Plan 2533’ in bolstering arguments for specific developments included in it when these cropped up in the traditional project approach and ignored it when the project was not included in the Plan (Sternstein, 1982).
Source: Report on the first revision of the plan for the Metropolitan Area.

Figure 3 The Greater Bangkok General Plan 2533 [A.D. 1990]; The Litchfield Plan
Figure 4 Land Use of Bangkok, 1968

Source: DTCP, 1971 #51
Figure 5 Don Muang Airport and the development of Bangkok, 1900 to 1968
As mentioned early, the issue of urban primacy has been ignored since 1960 and a number of consequences are relevant. Despite the shortcomings and many arguments, the NESDB is continuing its staunch policy on urban and regional development by aiming at targeted population of 32 million living in the radius of 200 kilometres around Bangkok in 2010. Is it reasonable policy to agglomerate nearly half of the national population in an area less than 15 per cent of Thailand?

![Urbanised Areas of Bangkok-Thonburi, 1900, 1936, 1958 and 1968](source: DTCP, 1971)

**Figure 6 Urbanised Areas of Bangkok-Thonburi, 1900, 1936, 1958 and 1968**

Figure 6 shows changes in the built-up area of Bangkok which has gradually increased from 13 square kilometers in 1900 to 43 square kilometers in 1936 and to
67 square kilometers in 1953. The built-up area of Bangkok has changed rapidly from 96 square kilometers in 1958 to 141.5 square kilometers in 1968 and to 330 square kilometers in 1981. The built-up area of Bangkok in the early 1990s covered parts of all the nearby provinces of Nonthaburi, Samut Prakan, Pathum Thani, Nakhon Pathom, Samut Sakon and Chachoengsao. It is believed that the built-up area of Bangkok Metropolitan Region has covered more than 3,000 square kilometers with a population of more than 12 million.

There were 1,474,455 people living in the Municipality of Bangkok and 302,732 people living in Thon Buri Municipality in 1956 compared with 10,127 people living in east Bangkok, that is Bang Kapi and Lat Krabang, at that time (Litchfield, 1959). The built environment of Bangkok in the 1960s is viewed as a compact city with a very high density of 65,300-84,000 persons per square kilometer living in the core of Bangkok or China Town. In the same period, east Bangkok was remote rural with a very low density of 160-240 persons per square kilometer (Sternstein, 1995).

A significant urban change in Bangkok during 1960-1990 was the decline of the inner city and the urban sprawl with a high rate of growth at the periphery. In 1990 the population of the city core including China Town, decreased from 65,300-84,000 persons in 1960 to 39,800-41,000 persons per square kilometer in 1990. Development directions along the north and east corridors of Bangkok were evident as a consequence of industrial and housing developments on cheaper land on the outskirts of Bangkok.

Six provinces around Bangkok, Nonthaburi, Samut Prakan, Pathum Thani, Nakhon Pathom, Samut Sakon and Chachoengsao, substantially absorbed young labour migrating from the countryside. A growing number of factories, industrial estates and housing projects became typical development phenomena in these provinces from 1960 to 1990.

In 1995, Sternstein presented a report on population changes in the Bangkok Metropolitan Region. It gave conclusive evidence that the rate of population growth in the inner core of Bangkok had dropped sharply and continuously. For example, Pom Prab Sattru Phai district lost 63.2 per cent of its population from 1970 to 1980. Meanwhile, the cencuses showed a much higher percentage of population growth in the periphery in the same period. Bang Kapi, Nong Kham and Bang Phli were among the districts with high rates of growth over 100 per cent (Sternstein, 1995). Some of
these figures have been available since the mid 1990s, however, they were not considered during the preparation of planning a few years later.

A curious question is what the involved authority was doing to deal with these urban changes. It is important to note that the first planning regulation in Thailand was Town and Country Planning Act 1952 and had been applied legally only once for a small town in the northeast in 1953. Twenty-three years later, Town and Country Planning Act 1975 (TCPA 1975) has become legal tool for making city plan for the whole country.

John Friedmann⁴ may be the first scholar who argued that the TCPA 1975 was unsuitable for Thai conditions and therefore was not likely to improve the planning of cities in the future. City planning in Thailand was adapted from British practice as found in the TCPA 1975. His argument was given on 21 March 1975, 44 days after the law had been issued. In Friedmann’s view, the master plans made by the DTCP were extremely simplistic in concept and execution and out-of-date according to rapid changes in Thailand’s cities (Friedmann, 1975). Despite strong criticism, however, the TCPA 1975 has been the primary legal tool of city plan making in the country since then and till today.

After waiting for decades, the ‘Bangkok General Plan 1992’, prepared by the DTCP, was first legally enforced on 6 July 1992. It was based on land use maps surveyed in 1986. This means that the planning process took more than six years before completion in 1992. As an unavoidable consequence of rapid economic growth, Bangkok was moving into a peak period of property speculation from 1986 to 1992. Consequently, the land use survey data base created in 1986 was out-of-date and not very useful for planning.

Based on the figures of building space⁵ in Bangkok, construction permission issued by Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA), from 1991 to 2000, the statistics show the increase of new building space from 11.02 million square metres in 1990 to 15.87 million square metres in 1991, to 16.52 million square metres in 1992 and to 17.50 million square metres in 1993, the highest figure ever recorded. The

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⁴ USOM nominated Dr. John Friedmann to assist NESDB in planning rural-urban development strategies and to select possible long-term advisors to the NESDB on regional planning in the rural-urban context. Dr. John Friedmann visited the Department of Town and Country Planning on 21 March 1975, after the most important planning law in Thailand was declared on 5 February 1975.

⁵ This includes all types of building; residence, office building, warehouse, industry and so on.
figures, however, show the decline of new building space sharply; from 9.14 million square metres in 1996, to 1.08 million square metres in 1998 and to 0.49 million square metres in 2000.

The built-up area of the city also continued to expand rapidly to cover all nearby provinces from where millions of people commute to work in Bangkok every day. These empirical facts were mentioned but were not considered or included in the plan which effectively planned for a static city.

It cannot be denied that the 17-year delay between the TCPA 1975 and the first legal city plan for Bangkok was serious because Bangkok and nearby cities and towns grew without control. Today, urban sprawl can be seen everywhere around Bangkok. In terms of the physical environment, Bangkok has become a metropolitan region comprising a number of settlements linked along road corridors under different forms of local administration. Obviously this phenomenon is a major problem for planning practice that has never been on any government’s agenda.

Bangkok and Singapore; co-operation and competition

As Peter Hall mentioned, it seems to be generally accepted that, economically and thereby politically, nations and regions are being increasingly brought into close relationships with one another, often competitive, sometimes co-operative (Brotchie and et al, 1995), the case of Bangkok and Singapore may be relevant according to some official statistics and reports. However, the two cities have had some linkages for centuries that can be understood both in terms of co-operation and competition.

Back to the 1980s, as a miracle, the name of four little tigers of Asia was the most spectacular example of successful economic development. The Republic of Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore have been recognized as the newly industrializing countries. Meanwhile, as possible candidates, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia, were in the similar process of development. However, the beautiful dream was short and collapsed in 1997 when the economic crisis started in Thailand.

The Asian crisis in 1997 has been discussed vastly searching for grassroots of the problem. Likewise, the similar economic crisis occurred again and again in many developing countries that Vietnam is the latest case. Competition in the region may be not the issue but more concentration is on the coming consequences shortly.

One may argue that Thailand is not a competitor in the view of Singapore. Both started the national economic planning in the 1960s but on the different basis
and approach. Singapore is a city state with a population of 4.5 million living on the small island of 693 square kilometers. In comparison, Bangkok is a capital of Thailand with a hinterland of 514,000 square kilometers, of which more than 12 million people live in and around the metropolis within the radius of 100 kilometres.

A crucial fact is that the GDP of Singapore is 106 billion US$ and the GDP of Thailand is 410 billion US$\(^6\). In short, Singapore has been developed and much richer than Thailand. Bangkok has been left behind the city state of Singapore. At regional level, Singapore has been the aviation hub, marine hub, education centre and financial centre in Southeast Asia completely.

For decades, many Thai governments overlooked the potentials of Singapore, a small island without hinterland and without its own natural resources. In fact the remarkable potential of Singapore is its excellent human resources as a primary driving force of economic development. A highly standard of education system in association with good discipline in the society may be not a secret of successful development.

As the current movement of livable and sustainable city continues, however, the competition among global cities may be not the issue for the Thai society as long as happiness is still available in the minds of Thai people.

**Conclusion**

For centuries, city development and planning in the Thai kingdom has been military-oriented rather than trade and commercially-oriented. From the period of absolute monarchy to the military dictatorship regime and the struggle for democracy in the 1990s, the power elite was concerned with the development of Bangkok, the centre of power. Despite radical changes in Thai politics, this priority has not changed much in the view of the ruling class. This is one of many reasons why the urban primacy of Bangkok remains unsolved. Subsequently, the primacy city of Bangkok continues to grow and has extended covering the nearby provinces becoming metropolitan region with a population more than 12 million.

Where a bureaucratic system cannot solve such problems effectively, one could be optimistic and argue that politics is supposed to fill this gap by introducing good policies and providing quick solutions. Thailand is not like this because the

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\(^6\) [http://www.Asiasource.org](http://www.Asiasource.org)
politicians put individual interest first and public interest last. Consequently, every major project in Thailand is affected by narrow political influence. The strange thing is that public interest does not react. Moreover, the nature of Thai politics, with constant power struggles among a number of parties and their factions, exacerbates the problems and puts solutions out of reach.

Under these complex circumstances, the future of Bangkok is gloomy and most involved authorities are still busy paying attention on day by day solution. While the chronic problems remain unsolved, the more serious issues of global warming and climate change are becoming the new public concern that Bangkok will be at risk extremely. These are challenges for Bangkok of the 21st century.

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