

CHAPTER
11**Section 5****HISTORYMAKERS**

Mongkut

Reforming King of Siam

"It is perhaps not too much to say that Siam owed to Mongkut more than anyone else . . . [its independence when] all the other states of Southeast Asia had come under European control."—Historian D. G. E. Hall

In the middle and late 1800s, Siam, present-day Thailand, faced serious challenges. Mongkut, a royal prince and future king, helped Siam meet them. He reformed the Buddhist religion and opened Siam to the West. He paved the way for his country to keep its independence while blending its culture with Western ideas.

Mongkut was the 43rd child of the king. He had high standing, however, because he was the first son born of a queen. Still, he was only 20 years old when his father died, and the council of the kingdom chose an older half-brother as the next ruler. Mongkut had recently become a Buddhist monk, and he remained one during the new leader's reign.

This period proved important for Mongkut's later life in three ways. He became a master of Buddhist thought and used his knowledge to launch a return to Buddhist roots. This reform movement made the religion easier to blend with Western science.

Second, Mongkut met scholars and thinkers from many Western nations. He was interested in their ideas and studied their languages and science. Later, when he became king, he allowed people from Europe and the United States to set up schools, hospitals, and printing presses in his country. One of them was the English woman Anna Leonowens, who became governess of Mongkut's children. Her book about life at court was the basis for the musical and movie *The King and I*.

Third, Mongkut's time as a monk allowed him to travel among the Siamese and become familiar with their lives. This experience gave him knowledge of his people and influenced his conduct. He became the first king of Siam to allow subjects to look at his face, and he generally took steps to end the tradition of treating the king as a god.

While living as a monk, Mongkut kept in contact with members of the court who were interested in establishing relations with the West. When his half-brother died in 1851, this group had Mongkut named king. He immediately began to modernize Siam. His chief goal was to make sure that European

powers treated Siam as a nation with its own rights and privileges. He wrote several letters to such rulers as Britain's Queen Victoria, the pope, and three American presidents. He even offered President James Buchanan the use of elephants to help the United States develop its economy.

In 1855, Mongkut agreed to a treaty with Great Britain. This pact ended limits on foreign trade that earlier kings had put in place. It granted British subjects in Siam the right to trade and move about the country freely. It also gave them the right to be free of Siamese laws and courts. This part of the treaty later proved unpopular with the Siamese. In return, the government of Siam collected a duty on goods imported into the country. The treaty was followed by similar ones with the United States and other European nations. As a result of these agreements, Siam began to export rice. More important, it avoided European colonial control.

Mongkut ruled until 1868. He once again gave the common people of Siam the right to ask the king directly for a fair solution to a problem. He supported Westerners who built hospitals, and he worked to improve the health and welfare of his people. He even started a mint to make coins, giving Siam a money economy.

When Mongkut died, his children continued the trends he had begun. One son became king and carried out the work of modernizing Siam. Another son became the nation's leading thinker and helped to spread Buddhism throughout the country.

Questions

1. **Making Inferences** How did Mongkut's form of Buddhism help Siam adopt Western ideas?
2. **Comparing and Contrasting** Compare the approaches that Menelik II of Ethiopia and Mongkut of Siam took to resisting Western imperialism.
3. **Drawing Conclusions** Why would the people of Siam not like the treaty provision that allowed the British to remain outside the law of Siam?